



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEXICAL APPROACH ON STUDENTS WITH VARYING WORKING MEMORY CAPACITIES

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ABSTRACT

For many decades, vocabulary learning was viewed as a secondary task in second language acquisition, often limited to memorizing isolated word lists. However, modern linguistics emphasizes that fluent communication depends heavily on the mastery of multi-word combinations, collocations, and lexical chunks. This article explores the Lexical Approach, a pedagogical methodology that prioritizes the teaching of prefabricated language units rather than isolated grammatical structures. Because language classrooms are cognitively diverse, individual differences in Working Memory Capacity (WMC) profoundly affect how students process, store, and retrieve these lexical phrases. This 5–8 page article examines the structural mechanics of the Lexical Approach, analyzes the cognitive baseline of working memory in language learning, and contrasts its effectiveness on students with high versus low working memory capacities. Furthermore, the paper provides practical classroom solutions, including scaffolded repetition, visual chunking, and dual-coding techniques, to help educators create a balanced learning environment that supports all cognitive profiles at Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate levels.

Introduction

When we look at traditional English classrooms, language teaching is often divided into two strict categories: grammar rules and vocabulary words. For a long time, standard methods suggested that learning a language meant building a structural house made of grammar rules (the bricks) and filling it with individual words (the mortar). Students spent hours learning how to conjugate verbs or analyzing formulaic sentence diagrams. However, many students discovered that even after scoring perfectly on grammar quizzes, they still struggled to understand native speakers or express their thoughts quickly in a real conversation. When speaking spontaneously, their speech was often slow, unnatural, and full of literal translations from their native language.

To solve this problem, linguistic researcher Michael Lewis introduced the **Lexical Approach** in 1993. Lewis made a famous and revolutionary claim: “*Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.*” In other words, language is not made of structural rules filled with single words; instead, it is made of multi-word blocks that already carry meaning. When native speakers talk, they do not create every single sentence from scratch using grammar formulas. Instead, they quickly retrieve pre-made blocks of language from their memory.

While the Lexical Approach has changed modern language classrooms for the better, its success depends heavily on the cognitive abilities of the students. Learning language in large blocks requires a specific cognitive tool known as **Working Memory**. Every student has a different working memory capacity. Some students can hold and manipulate a large amount of information at one time, while others experience cognitive overload very quickly. This article explores how the Lexical Approach impacts students with different working memory capacities and outlines how teachers can adjust this method to help every learner succeed.

Understanding the Lexical Approach and Lexical Chunks

To understand why the Lexical Approach is closely connected to memory, we must first understand what “lexis” actually means. Lexis is a much broader concept than simple vocabulary. Vocabulary usually refers to single words (e.g., *book*, *beautiful*, *run*). Lexis, however, includes single words alongside combinations of words that regularly go together. These combinations are called **lexical chunks**, multi-word units, or prefabricated language.

Michael Lewis divided lexis into four main categories:

1. **Single Words:** Individual vocabulary items, which remain important but are not the sole focus.
2. **Collocations:** Words that naturally and frequently sit together in English. For example, we say “*make a mistake*” (not *do a mistake*) or “*heavy rain*” (not *strong rain*).
3. **Institutionalized Utterances:** Fixed phrases used for social functions, such as “*If I were you, I would...*”, “*Would you mind...?*”, or “*See you later.*” The user does not need to analyze the grammar of these phrases; they simply use them as a whole block.
4. **Sentence Frames and Heads:** Phrases that provide a structural starting point for an idea, such as “*The main problem is that...*” or “*On the one hand..., on the other hand...*”

In a classroom that uses the Lexical Approach, teachers do not teach the future tense by explaining complex grammar formulas. Instead, they teach chunks like “*I’m planning to...*” or “*I’m about to...*” as single vocabulary blocks. Students learn the meaning of the entire phrase at once. This drastically reduces the time they need to spend thinking about rules during a conversation, which helps them speak more naturally and fluently.

The Cognitive Architecture of Working Memory

Every pedagogical method must pass through the human brain to be effective. In second language acquisition, the primary gatekeeper of information is working memory.

What is Working Memory?

Working Memory (WM) is a temporary mental workspace. It is the cognitive system responsible for holding information in your mind for a short period while you actively manipulate, process, and organize it. Unlike long-term memory, which is a permanent

storage locker with unlimited space, working memory is highly limited in both duration and space. It functions like a small mental desk: you can only place a few papers on it at the same time before it becomes cluttered and disorganized.

In language learning, working memory is used constantly. When a student listens to an English sentence, their working memory must hold the first few words in mind while they listen to the end of the sentence, decode the vocabulary, analyze the syntax, and calculate the overall meaning. When speaking, working memory holds the intended message while the brain searches for the necessary words and organizes vocal articulation.

The Phonological Loop and Cognitive Load

According to Alan Baddeley's famous model of working memory, the system contains a specialized component called the ***Phonological Loop***. This loop acts as an "inner ear" that processes audio information and speech sounds. When a student tries to memorize a new phrase, they repeat it silently to themselves in their phonological loop.

If a language task demands too much mental effort, it creates ***Cognitive Load***. When the cognitive load exceeds a student's working memory limit, the system experiences a breakdown. The student becomes confused, forgets what they wanted to say, and cannot move the new language information from their short-term working memory into their permanent long-term memory storage.

The Impact of the Lexical Approach on High WMC Learners

Students who possess a High Working Memory Capacity (High WMC) have a larger mental desk. They can process complex inputs and retain larger amounts of immediate data, which gives them a distinct advantage in a lexical classroom.

Rapid Pattern Recognition

High WMC learners excel at spotting patterns across long stretches of language. When exposed to authentic texts, videos, or dialogues full of lexical chunks, these students can easily hold a complete multi-word phrase in their minds while simultaneously analyzing its social context. They do not get bogged down by single words; instead, they see the "big picture" of language structure.

Efficient Storage of Large Chunks

Because their phonological loop can handle a large amount of audio data, High WMC students can memorize long lexical strings with ease. For example, a phrase like *"To tell you the truth, I haven't thought about it yet"* can be processed by a High WMC learner as a single, unified block. When they need to speak, they can retrieve this massive block instantly from their long-term memory. This gives them exceptional oral fluency, as they do not pause between individual words to assemble grammar rules. They experience the Lexical Approach exactly as Michael Lewis intended: as a fast track to natural, native-like speech production.

The Low WMC Learner's Dilemma: Cognitive Overload

Conversely, students with a Low Working Memory Capacity (Low WMC) face a major cognitive barrier when entering a pure lexical classroom. Because their mental workspace is smaller, a teaching style that focuses heavily on large multi-word blocks can easily overwhelm them.

The Problem of Fragmented Chunks

When a teacher introduces a long lexical chunk like “*I would appreciate it if you could...*”, a Low WMC student's phonological loop often gets overloaded. Their memory cannot hold all seven words at the same time. As a result, the chunk breaks apart in their mind. They might remember only the beginning (“*I would appreciate*”) or the end (“*if you could*”), losing the structural connection between the parts. When they try to use the phrase later, they often create broken, ungrammatical combinations because the original block was stored in a fragmented way.

Retrieval Deficits and Fluency Bottlenecks

During spontaneous speaking activities, Low WMC learners experience a retrieval bottleneck. Because their working memory cannot easily handle large pieces of data under time pressure, searching for an entire multi-word chunk can feel exhaustingly difficult. To cope with this stress, they often fall back on a slow, word-by-word assembly method, translating individual words from their native language. This increases their anxiety and raises their affective filter, making them look less proficient than they actually are.

Actionable Solutions: Differentiated Lexical Instruction (DLI)

To create an equitable and inclusive classroom, teachers must not abandon the Lexical Approach. Teaching chunks is still the most effective way to build real-world speaking skills. Instead, educators should implement *Differentiated Lexical Instruction (DLI)*—a modified approach that uses targeted cognitive scaffolding to make lexical chunks manageable for students of all memory capacities.

Micro-Chunking and Progressive Expansion

Instead of throwing long, intimidating lexical phrases at students all at once, teachers should break them down into smaller, functional components and expand them progressively.

- *Step 1:* Start with a core micro-chunk: “*...if you could...*”
- *Step 2:* Add a functional extension: “*...appreciate it if you could...*”
- *Step 3:* Build the complete institutionalized phrase: “*I would appreciate it if you could...*”

This step-by-step approach ensures that Low WMC learners never experience cognitive overload. They can anchor the small core piece securely in their working memory before adding more weight to the phrase, allowing them to build accuracy and confidence at a manageable pace.

Visual Chunking and Dual-Coding Techniques

Human memory is incredibly visual. When we present lexical chunks using only audio input or plain text, we place a massive burden on the phonological loop. Teachers can use *Dual-Coding Theory* by pairing verbal chunks with distinct visual organizers, color-coded blocks, or symbolic icons.

For example, when teaching collocations, a teacher can use colored boxes to show how words stick together:

Make + a mistake ; Take + a photo.

By organizing phrases into clear visual units, the brain can bypass the crowded audio pathway and store the collocation as a unified mental image. This visual strategy drastically

reduces the cognitive load on Low WMC learners, making it much easier for them to retrieve the entire block during a live conversation.

Spaced Repetition and Receptive-to-Productive Moving

Working memory requires repeated exposure to transfer data into permanent long-term memory. DLI classrooms utilize *Spaced Repetition Systems (SRS)* to review chunks at strategically timed intervals (e.g., 10 minutes after first exposure, the next day, and one week later).

Furthermore, teachers should never force students to produce new chunks immediately in spontaneous speaking tasks. The lesson should move smoothly from *receptive recognition* (finding chunks in a reading text) to *structured production* (matching exercises or sentence completion) before finally moving to *free productive speaking* (role-plays or discussions). This careful progression allows Low WMC students to slowly strengthen their mental connections, ensuring they feel secure and supported every step of the way.

Conclusion

The Lexical Approach represents a monumental and highly valuable shift in modern second language teaching. By focusing on multi-word units, collocations, and pre-made phrases, it gives students the actual tools they need to achieve genuine oral fluency and cross-cultural communicative confidence. However, language teachers must remain deeply aware that the human brain is the ultimate setting where learning takes place. Students are not cognitive carbon copies of one another; they possess varying working memory capacities that heavily dictate how they handle language input.

An effective and empathetic educator does not blame a quiet or slow student for having a smaller cognitive workspace. Instead, by moving toward a Differentiated Lexical Instruction framework, teachers can adjust their methods to support every cognitive profile. By implementing micro-chunking, visual dual-coding, and structured spaced repetition, we can transform the Lexical Approach from a demanding cognitive hurdle into an accessible, supportive pathway. In doing so, we ensure that every language learner—regardless of their natural working memory capacity—can successfully internalize the rich patterns of English, break through their learning plateaus, and speak the language with clarity, accuracy, and natural eloquence.

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