BLOCK 4.
The past meets the present: Language teaching methods in the 20th and 21st centuries
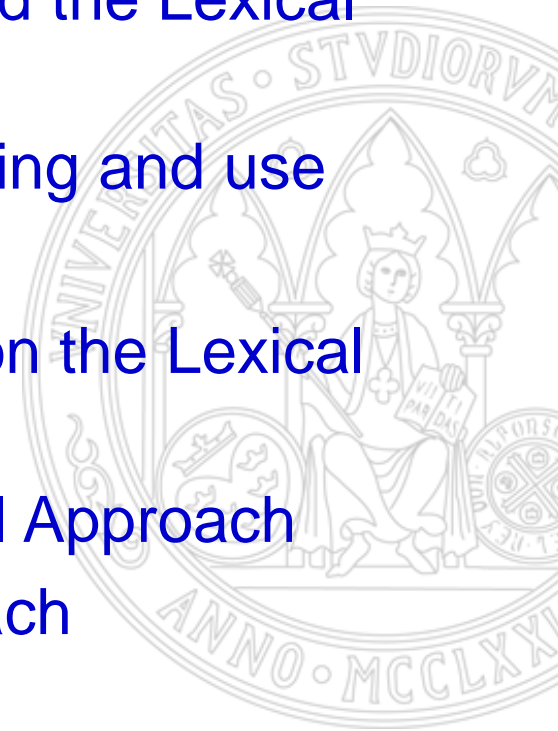
Sub-block 4.4.
Other alternative approaches
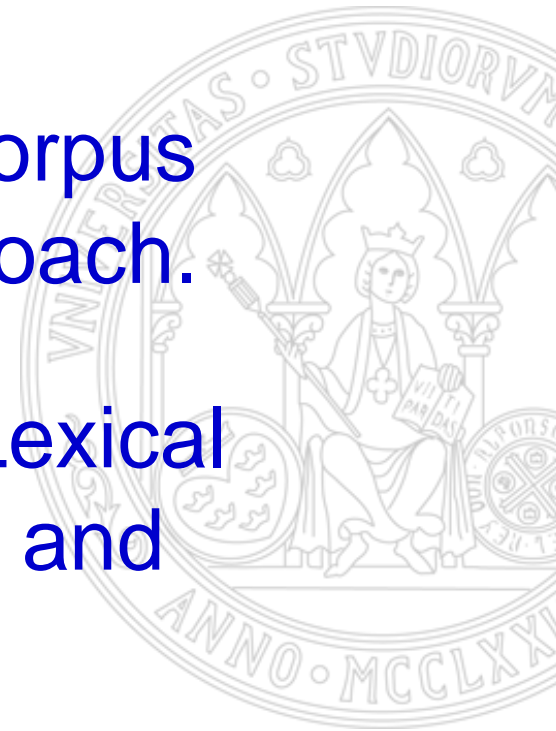
Unit 4.4.1. The Lexical Approach

Outline

1. Objectives of this unit
2. Goal of the Lexical Approach
3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

   3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

   3.2. Rationale for a lexical syllabus

   3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach
5. Critical assessment of the Lexical Approach

1. Objectives of this unit

1. Reflect on the role of lexis in language learning and use.

2. Learn about the influence of Corpus Linguistics on the Lexical Approach.

3. Know the assumptions of the Lexical Approach in language learning and teaching.

2. Goal of the Lexical Approach

To develop communicative competence by learning prefabricated language

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

What is more important for language learning and use: grammar or vocabulary?

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

What is more important, grammar or vocabulary?

Without grammar little can be conveyed;
without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.
(Wilkins, 1972:111)

A lexical mistake often causes misunderstanding,
while a grammar mistake rarely does.
(John Sinclair, IATEFL Conference, University of Keele, UK, 1996)

When students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries.
(S. Krashen, 1987. British Council Conference, Milan).

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

✓ Key works:

❑ *The Lexical Syllabus* (D. Willis, 1990). Pioneering work

  ▪ Pedagogical implementation: *Collins COBUILD English Course* (J. Willis & D. Willis, 1989)

  ▪ It draws on the COBUILD Corpus, which contains the commonest words and phrases in English and their meanings.

❑ *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching* (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992)

❑ *The Lexical Approach* (Lewis, 1993, 1996, 1997).

Though the Lexical Approach *is a term coined by Michael Lewis, we will use this term to refer to all the varieties within the same approach for which lexis is the centre of language structure, learning and teaching.*

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

The Lexical Approach is *explicitly an approach, not a syllabus or method. It advocates a total re-evaluation of the language which is offered to students, and how that language is analysed. It also suggests that many traditional classroom activities and attitudes are counter-productive and should be abandoned, or at least greatly de-emphasized.*

(Lewis, 1996: 13-14)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

✓ Key role of lexicon for language structure, SLA and language use

✓ A lexical syllabus prioritises lexicon as the unit of syllabus planning and teaching against grammar, functions, notions, structures, etc.

✓ *Perhaps we should base our teaching on the assumption that, for a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Our teaching, therefore, would center on these patterns and the ways they can pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur.*

(Nattinger, 1980: 341. In Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 134-135)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

- ✓ Basic assumptions of the Lexical Approach
  - ❑ General traditional belief in ELT is wrong:
    - ▪ Preeminence of the grammatical component
    - ▪ The mastery of the grammatical system is a prerequisite for correct and effective communication
  - ❑ Lexis is the most important element and organising principle in syllabus design, because words are the main carriers of meaning, which is essential for effective communication.
  - ❑ Key principle: "Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not of lexicalized grammar" (Lewis, 1993: 34).

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

✓ A distinction between

    ❑ Vocabulary: traditional isolated content words

    ❑ Lexis: single words plus multiword lexical units or chunks. Chunks are "strings of words which go together (i.e. prefabs and collocations)" (Harwood, 2002: 140).

    Other names for lexical units: "lexical phrases", "lexicalised items", "lexicalised stems", "prefabricated patterns", "speech formulae" (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 132, for full references)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.1. Importance of lexis in language learning and use

✓ Lewis' taxonomy of lexical items (1997: 91ff.):

- *words (e.g.,* book, pen*)*

- *polywords (e.g.,* by the way, upside down*)*

- *collocations, or word partnerships (e.g.,* community service, absolutely convinced)

- *institutionalized utterances (e.g.,* I'll get it; We'll see; That'll do; If I were you . . .; Would you like a cup of coffee?*)*

- *sentence frames and heads (e.g.,* That is not as… as you think; The fact/suggestion/problem/danger was ...) *and even text frames (e.g.,* In this paper we explore . . .; Firstly...; Secondly …; Finally…)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.2. Rationale for a lexical syllabus

a) From the viewpoint of language structure

b) From the viewpoint of language learning

a) From the viewpoint of language structure

- The Lexical Approach rejects Chomksy's LAD on the basis of several studies which show that "prefabricated items form a significant part of a native speaker's spoken and written output" (Harwood, 2002: 140).

- Cowie (1994: 3168): "native-like proficiency of a language depends crucially on knowledge of a stock of prefabricated units".

- *The lexical syllabus ensures that essential grammatical and other structures and functions will be learned automatically by choosing the most frequent words and word combinations for teaching. Core grammatical words such as* the, of, I, that, was, a *and* and *make up nearly 20 per cent of a typical English text and in a frequency-based lexical syllabus the main grammatical forms should automatically occur in the correct proportions.*

(Carter, 2001: 46)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.2. Rationale for a lexical syllabus

a) From the viewpoint of language structure

b) From the viewpoint of language learning

- Aston (1995): the use of prefabs can speed language processing in both comprehension and production, thus contributing to native-like fluency.

- The importance of **collocation** in language learning and use
  - Collocation is "the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency" (Lewis, 1997: 8).
  - "Collocational knowledge indicates which lexical items co-occur frequently with others and how they combine within a sentence" (McEnery & Xiao, 2011: 368).

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.2. Rationale for a lexical syllabus

- **The importance of collocation**

  - *Collocation is arbitrary, decided only by linguistic convention and use. Some collocations are fully fixed* ("to catch a cold," "rancid butter," "drug addict"), *while others are more or less fixed:* Learn by doing / by heart / by observation / by rote / from experience; badly / bitterly / deeply / seriously / severely hurt.

    (Lewis, 1997: 8ff)
    .

  - *Instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic, ways.*

    (Lewis, 1997: 204)

  - Collocational knowledge is important for developing L1/L2 language skills (for references, see McEnery & Xiao, 2011: 368).

    For example, more proficient L2 writers use significantly more correct and varied collocations than less proficient learners (Zhang, 1993).

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

❑ The Lexical Approach stresses the need to use corpora to inform pedagogical materials.

❑ Examples of corpora: COBUILD Bank of English Corpus (from 7.3 million words to 20 million words); the Cambridge International Corpus, and the British National Corpus (more than 300 million words).

For a list of useful corpus sites and tools, see Reppen (2011: 46-50)

❑ Real language. What the language coursebooks teach is "not what people really say" (Lewis, 1997: 10), but "TEFLese" (D. Willis, 1990: vii)

❑ *The lexical approach* […] *draws on the COBUILD research which provides an analysis of a corpus of natural language of twenty million words. The COBUILD corpus provided the content of the lexical syllabus –the commonest words and phrases in English and their meanings.*

[…]

The description of language implicit in the Collins COBUILD English Course is very different from other courses. We would argue that it is a more accurate description, and that this derives from the fact that it is based on real language.

(D. Willis, 1990: 124)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

❑ Corpora offer reliable data on language use, specifically *frequency* of occurrence, frequent patterns and collocates in different genres and registers (see, for instance, Biber, Leech & Conrad's (2002) *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English)*

❑ Most used words: in theory more useful for communication.

"The 700 most frequent words cover 70% of text, but coverage begins to drop rapidly thereafter. The next 800 words cover a further 6% of text and the next 1000 words cover 4%…" (D. Willis, 1990: 47).

Therefore, word frequency would determine the contents of the *COBUILD Course*.

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

❑ Word frequency would determine the contents of the course.

Level 1 would aim to cover the most frequent 700 words together with their common patterns and uses. […] *Level 2 would recycle these words and go on to cover the next 800 to bring us up to the 1,500 level, and Level 3 would recycle those 1,500 and add a further 1,000.*

(D. Willis, 1990: vi)

a) *Do you remember the predecessors of vocabulary frequency counts for foreign language teaching purposes?*

b) *What is the difference between such predecessors and the COBUILD Course?*

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

The lexical syllabus does not identify simply the commonest words of the language. Inevitably it focuses on the commonest patterns too. Most important of all it focuses on these patterns in their most natural environment. Because of this, the lexical syllabus not only subsumes a structural syllabus, it also indicates how the 'structures' which make up that syllabus should be exemplified. It does this by emphasising the importance of natural language.

(D. Willis, 1990: v)

Do you think that the frequency factor should be the only principle to take into account in a lexical syllabus?

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach
3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

❑ […] *while the frequency factor should not be ignored in our attempts to mirror real English in the classroom, it is clear that frequency should not be the only, or even the principal, factor in determining the lexis to teach. Relevant also is work on **text type** (e.g. Biber et al. 1994) and **genre analysis** (e.g. Bhatia 1993; Swales 1990), showing that a research article, for instance, will feature different types of structures and phrases when compared with a business letter; and that to a certain extent such features are predictable. So we would do well to bear in mind **learners' wants and needs** […]*

(Harwood, 2002: 143. Our emphasis)

3. Historical background and rationale behind the Lexical Approach

3.3. Corpus Linguistics and its influence on the Lexical Approach

❑ For collocations: key word in context (KWIC). Structured way of analysing language.

   ▪ Most popular application of computer-based presentation of corpora: concordance lines to illustrate the contexts of use of some words or structures

   ▪ Sample of concordance with KWIC

- Our philosophy   is based on the belief that
- It is a package which is based on the philosophy which
- opposition to the merger is based on the argument that the
- over time - which is based on the concept that a
- of Andrews's theorising is based on the premise that
- Our forecast for 1996 is based on the assumption that
- known. [p] Osteopathy is based on the notion that the
- city of Bremen. The idea is based on the principle that
- a rabbit out of a hat is based on the original in which
- Portfolio management is based on the concept of
- will disappear is based on the coincidence of two

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 1. The Why. Underlying principles and beliefs

- ❑ Theory of language (nature of language, including approach to culture)
    - ▪ Communicative nature of language (transmission of meanings)
    - ▪ From Lewis (1993, 1997):
        - ○ *Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar. The standard view divides language into grammar (structure) and (vocabulary); the Lexical Approach challenges this fundamental view of language.*
        - ○ *The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-words 'chunks' .*
        - ○ *Language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text.*
    - ▪ Culture: as reflected in lexis.

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 1. The Why. Underlying principles and beliefs

❑ Theory of learning (learning principles)

▪ Holistic view of language learning:

instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into ever smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic, ways.

(Lewis, 1997: 204)

▪ Language is learnt in a great extent as multi-word chunks, as collocates (Lewis, 2000)

▪ Options for learning lexical chunks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 134):

a) Massive exposure to input, especially through reading

Unit 4.3.3

b) Making students explore contexts of use of lexical chunks via computer concordance databases

c) Contrastive approach

Axis 1. The Why. Underlying principles and beliefs

❑ Theory of learning (learning principles)

▪ Attempt to base the Lexical Approach on a well-grounded theory of learning:

- *Encountering new learning items on several occasions is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for learning to occur.*

- *Noticing lexical chunks or collocations is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for "input" to become "intake".*

- *Noticing similarities, differences, restrictions, and examples contributes to turning input into intake, although formal descriptions of rules probably does help.*

- *Acquisition is based not on the application of formal rules but on an accumulation of examples from which learners make provisional generalizations. Language production is the product of previously met examples, not formal rules.*

  Unit 4.3.3

- *No linear syllabus can adequately reflect the nonlinear nature of acquisition.*

  (Lewis, 2000: 184)

Which activity sequencing model does the Lexical Approach reject as a consequence of the assumption behind the "nonlinear nature of acquisition"?

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 1. The Why. Underlying principles and beliefs

❑ Theory of teaching (pedagogical principles)

- Object of teaching: real language.

- Lexical chunks should be contextualised.

- Inductive learning and teaching. Consciousness-raising /awareness-raising activities. "DIY" approach.

- The learner as a "data and discourse analyst".

- Most prototypical activity sequencing model: *Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment* (Lewis, 1996)

- Discrete-item based teaching and related procedures are avoided.

- Error correction: mostly implicit procedures. Students should be allowed to self-correct.

- L1: useful for contrastive analysis of lexical chunks.

- The teacher must encourage, prepare and adequately structure the exposure to lexical chunks. The teacher is one of the major sources of input for the learner.

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 2. The What. Objectives of teaching. Syllabus specifications

- ❑ Emphasised language content: lexis.

- ❑ Prioritised skills: the four of them.

- ❑ A lexical syllabus emphasises real language use, as illustrated by representative corpora. May admit different sources : frequency lists, texts, concordances

- ❑ Lexical syllabuses are not only word-based; also multi-word items -pattern and structure-based, as revealed by use.

- ❑ A syllabus based on the Lexical Approach

  1. specifies words

  2. specifies their meanings

  3. specifies the common phrases in which they are used (via corpora)

  4. identifies the most common words and patterns in their real environments (via corpora)

- ❑ The lexical syllabus is far from the structural syllabus: it may include structures, but in so far as frequent usage turns them into "fixed language chunks or patterns".

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 2. The What. Objectives of teaching. Syllabus specifications

❑ Organising principles:

1) Frequency

Slides 17 and 18

2) Not only frequency:

Slide 20

Lewis' Lexical Approach: frequency is important but the greatest emphasis falls on usefulness to the learner (Lewis, 1997).

3) A functional schema for organising lexical chunks (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992: 185)

Distinguishing lexical phrases as social interactions, necessary topics, and discourse devices seems to us the most effective distinction for pedagogical purposes, but that is not to say that a more effective way of grouping might not be necessary in the wake of further research.

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ **Activities**

Inductive activities:

1. Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language.
2. First and second language comparisons and translation –carried out chunk-for-chunk, rather than word-for-word– aimed at raising language awareness.
3. Repetition and recycling of activities, such as summarising a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep words and expressions that have been learned actively.
4. Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context.
5. Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.
6. Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.
7. Working with language corpora accessible on the computer or created by the teacher for use in the classroom.

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Activity sequencing models: *Section 6.4 in Block 6*

a) Task-planning-report (D. Willis & J. Willis, 1987).

Following on from Unit 4.3.4, can you define the phases and the pedagogical objective of each one of them –whether fluency or accuracy?

b) Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment (Lewis, 1996)

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Activity sequencing models:

a) Task-planning-report (D. Willis & J. Willis, 1987)

b) Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment (O-H-E) (Lewis, 1996)

- ▪ *Observation*: "exposure subjected to critical examination" (Lewis, 1996: 15). Reading or listening to texts.

- ▪ *Hypothesise* and *Experiment*

  - • Linguistic objective, where the teacher's role is to help students to

    make explicit their perceptions of similarity and difference, and then, by selecting the further input materials or providing the learners with good questions about the input, helps them to correct, clarify and deepen those perceptions.

    (Lewis, 1996: 15)

  - • Pedagogical objective: implementation of activities conducive to fulfil linguistic objective.

    E.g. sorting, matching, identifying and describing, such as language puzzles, collocation dominoes, dictations with specially selected utterances to be copied, etc.

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Procedure

J. Willis (2011: 60-61) establishes the following procedure for a lesson based on an *ad-hoc* ESP corpus (compilied by the learners themselves –ESP lecturers in this case):

• *Assembling*

Learners identify lines containing the key word, and write them up (on the board, a wall poster or on an OHP transparency), with the key word in central position.

• *Analysing*

• *Extension and consolidation*

1

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Roles of teachers

- Teacher: major source in demonstrating how lexical phrases are used for different functional purposes (Richards & Rodgers, 2001)

- Helping learners to become responsible and managing their own learning. Accordingly, teachers should "abandon the idea of the teacher as 'knower' and concentrate instead on the idea of the learner as 'discoverer' "(D. Willis, 1990: 131).

- Guiding the learners in the manipulation and analysis of data technologically retrieved.

❑ Roles of learners

- Responsible for their own learning.

- Data/Discourse analyst. The learner must construct "his or her own linguistic generalizations based on the examination of large corpora of language samples taken from 'real life'" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 136)

4. Analysis of the components of the Lexical Approach

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Roles of materials

Materials should be specially created or adapted to provide students with structured input from real life so as to discover relevant vocabulary, collocations, and any other lexical chunks.

Types of materials:

- *Type 1 consists of complete course packages including texts, tapes, teacher's manuals, and so on, such as the Collins COBUILD English Course (Willis and Willis 1989).*

- *Type 2 is represented by collections of vocabulary teaching activities such as those that appear in Lewis's* Implementing the Lexical Approach *(Lewis 1997).*

- *Type 3 consists of "printout" versions of computer corpora collections packaged in text format. Tribble and Jones (1990) include such materials with accompanying student exercises based on the corpora printouts.*

- *Type 4 materials are computer concordancing programs and attached sets to allow students to set up and carry out their own analyses. These are typically packaged in CD-ROM form, such as Oxford's Micro Concord, or can be downloaded from sites on the Internet.*

(Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 136)

5. Critical assessment of the Lexical Approach
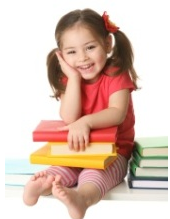
a) *So far, what do you think about the Lexical Approach? Can you think of any advantages and disadvantages of this approach?*

b) *Do you think that lexis is sufficient to cater for all the components of communicative competence?*

2
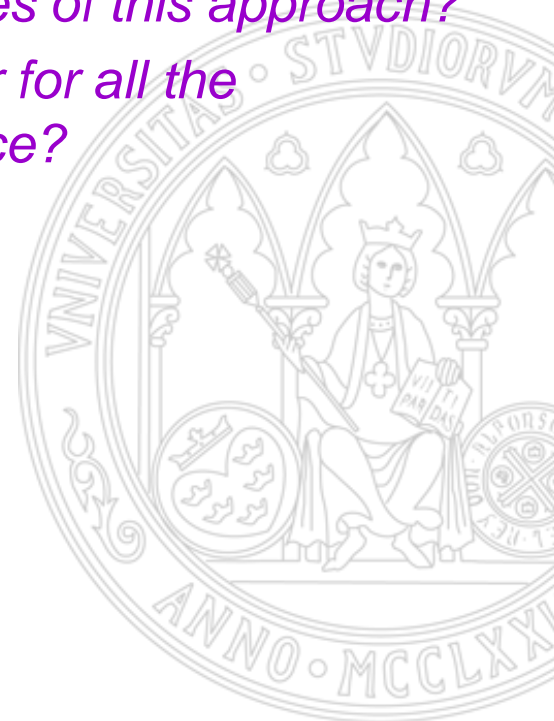
5. Critical assessment of the Lexical Approach

❑ **Positive aspects**

- Learning prefabs is a very important element of language use
- Fostering corpora and hence authentic language use to be taught to learners, rather than stilted or pedagogically arranged language

5. Critical assessment of the Lexical Approach

❑ **Negative aspects**

1. Teachers and learners need training in using computational tools to analyse data retrieved from technological corpora

2. *It remains to be convincingly demonstrated how a lexically based theory of language and language learning can be applied at the levels of design and procedure in language teaching, suggesting that it is still an idea in search of an approach and a methodology.*

(Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 138)

3. *As it stands at present, the concept of taking a lexical approach to teaching is work in progress (Thornbury 1998), since there are two main areas connected with the approach which are in need of clarification: while some researchers (e.g. Cook 1998; Thornbury 1998) have critiqued the approach's purported lack of principled foundation, there is also concern about the practicalities of the approach's implementation (e.g. Baigent 1999; Lewis 1997; Thornbury 1998).*

(Harwood, 2002: 149)

5. Critical assessment of the Lexical Approach

❏ **Influence of the Lexical Approach on FLT:**
- See "Positive aspects".
- Emphasis on the key role of vocabulary and lexis in general whenever one wants to engage in communicative processes.