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Teaching Thai and Indonesian with the Lexical Approach

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Lexical Approach (LA) to those readers who may not be familiar with it and to demonstrate some ways it can be applied in the teaching of Southeast Asian languages--in this case, Indonesian and Thai.

The Lexical Approach was developed by Michael Lewis in Great Britain in the early 1990's. It is a reaction to much traditional thinking regarding language teaching, especially the over-emphasis on grammar and the under-emphasis on lexis. His ideas owe a great deal to the work of Stephen Krashen as well as others. Lewis does not advocate a revolution in how languages should be taught; rather he advocates a change in attitude among teachers and materials writers.

This co-authored paper begins with a presentation by Vamarasi of some of the most important principles of the Lexical Approach. Following that, she continues with a sample page from a lexical notebook, a learning tool which Lewis strongly advocates. Finally, Bofman gives several lexically-based exercises for the teaching and learning of Thai.

Some Important Principles of the Lexical Approach

- **Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.**

Lexis, not grammar, should be the organizing principle of any language teaching or learning. This is an attitude, a frame of mind which will have effects (small or large) throughout the curriculum. Grammar still has a role to play, but not a pre-eminent one.

- **There is no clear difference between grammar and lexis; instead, they form the endpoints on a continuum, and much falls in the middle.**

Much of what has traditionally been taught as grammar (e.g., the modals *would* and *will*) is better taught as lexis. Many of the traditional descriptions of these items are wrong or misleading—such as the idea that *would* is used primarily in conjunction with *if* to form conditionals. Corpus data says otherwise; a more typical use for *would* is in sentences such as *I would love to go*. Another example is prepositions. Prepositions are often selected by verbs: English *rely on*, *think about*, or Indonesian *dating di*, *marah kepada*. The difference can be described as rule-governed vs. arbitrary. Not a lot is, in fact, totally rule-governed.

- **We learn both L1 and L2 in chunks—i.e., in multi-word units. These include fixed phrases, idioms, strong collocations, and semi-fixed expressions.**

Even very young children have been heard to say expressions such as *It's as good as new*, *I stand corrected*, and *back to normal*. Presumably, they learned these on very scant evidence. How did they do this? Possibly because the length of the items makes them stand out more; also, their meanings are closely tied to the situation of utterance. In any case, once they are learned, they can be retrieved as a unit; this sort of language does not have to be created each time. In typical language classes, students learn greetings (*Selamat pagi*, *Apa kabar?*) and politeness phrases (*Minta maaf*, *permisi dulu*) as chunks. But these are just the tip of the chunk iceberg for any language.

- **A central element of language teaching is raising students' awareness of chunks and developing their ability to 'chunk' language successfully.**

This gets students away from listening for and reading a word at a time, a common tendency among language learners. Once students learn to recognize chunks, they should be better prepared to produce language. A useful exercise for intermediate students is to read or listen to an authentic text and pick out all the chunks they can.

- **Since the primary goal of language courses is successful communication, fluency is to be stressed over accuracy.**

This goal is not peculiar to the Lexical Approach, but is common to many approaches. It is important to LA because a person can usually be understood provided the proper words or expressions are known; the same cannot be said if one knows only correct grammar.

- **Grammar should be taught receptively, by raising students' awareness of structures through comparison and contrast.**

Such activities require deep cognitive processing, and should lead to greater understanding of grammatical structures than the traditional deductive method of rule and practice. For instance, if students are given several examples of *I'll take it* and others of *I'm going to take it*, they can come up with their own rule, provisional though it may be. Indonesian verbs with

the *-i* and *-kan* suffixes vs. 0 could be taught this way; also *sedangkan/sambil* 'while.'

- **Evidence from computational linguistics and discourse analysis influence syllabus content and sequence.**

Corpora and concordances are particularly helpful, because they show how language is actually used, rather than how someone thinks language is used or ought to be used. Often language students learn overly-formal language; corpora that included a variety of data sources would in many cases show more colloquial-and therefore more useful- language. A corpus is needed for Indonesian, Thai, and the other Southeast Asian languages!

- **A valuable method in learning lexis is the use of lexical notebooks.**

Lewis calls these a “fully personalized learning aid.” This is not simply a bilingual list of every word encountered, to be made and then forgotten, but rather a constantly developing record of what the student is exploring about the language. It is also a personal record, as each student in the same class would choose to develop different items. (See an example of a page on *ada* in the appendix.)

References

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Appendix

Some Notes on Lexical Notebooks

Lewis calls the lexical notebook a “fully personalized learning aid.” All students in a class will develop theirs differently, according to their individual interests and abilities.

Ideally these pages should be done on a word processor, so that the entries can easily be edited and expanded. If that is impractical or impossible, then this could be done in a loose-leaf format. There is a great deal of learning that can be done in the copying and recopying, editing and re-editing processes.

According to Lewis’s (2000) most recent publication, his “current format for a learner notebook entry” includes the following information: the word in original orthography, pronunciation and translation, sample sentence(s), important collocates (For a noun, adjective and verb collocates should be listed. For a verb, subject noun and, for a transitive verb, object noun collocates should be

listed.), significant grammar patterns, and favorites—“that is, patterns or expressions which the individual particularly likes and will probably use.” An example of a grammatical pattern for *criticism* is **for V+ing**, as in ‘criticism for raising taxes.’ A possible favorite for *criticism* might be ‘to come under heavy criticism’ or ‘the criticism has been leveled at...’

Other kinds of information that can be put in these include cultural notes, irregular forms, derived forms, pronunciation idiosyncrasies, and cross references to other related items. Don’t forget the cultural information which is inherent in many lexical items (for Indonesian, *halus* and *kasar*, for example).

What follows is not meant to be an actual page, since it probably contains much more information than a student would typically accumulate in one language course. Rather, it provides examples of the kinds of information which a student might collect on individual lexical items, as well as how they could be displayed.

Sample Page from an Indonesian Lexical Notebook (with Commentary)

Information

Ada

‘there is/are’; ‘to have’; ‘to be’

Sample (authentic) sentences with the meaning ‘there is/are’:

Ada orang yang mencuci pakaian? ‘Is there someone (here) who washes clothes?’
Ada waktu. ‘There is time.’

Sample (authentic) sentences with the meaning ‘to have, possess’:

Ada rokok?
‘Do you have cigarettes?’

Ada.
‘Yes.’ *Ia

Sample (authentic) sentences with the meaning ‘to be (in a place)’:

Ia ada di rumah.
‘He/she is at home.’
Di negeri ini ada kangguru.
‘In this country there are kangaroos.’

Other derived forms:

adapun ‘concerning’

Commentary

Material about a word such as this would typically be found throughout a textbook.

These authentic sentences are from a corpus of a student’s own observations.

It’s important to learn what to say and what not to say.

keadaan ‘situation, state’
adanya ‘presence, situation’

Collocates of *mengadakan*

‘to arrange, bring about’

Mengadakan: *pesta*
 damai
 Rapat
 ceramah
 perbaiki
 selamatan

It has been said that collocates are “the company a word keeps.”

It is helpful to arrange the information visually, in order to assist the eye.

English uses different verbs for these direct objects.

‘party, peace, meeting, lecture,
repairs, special occasion’

Synonyms of *mengadakan*:

membua
menyeleng
garakan
menjadikan

We learn a lot about a word from how it differs from similar words.

Favorite expression:

Ada apa?
‘What’s the matter?’

Make learning personal!

Other common expressions:

Tiada (<*tidak ada*)
‘No; there is none.’
Tak ada gunanya.
‘It’s no use.’

Expressions are not just words strung together.

Proverbs:

Ada gula, ada semut.
‘Where there is sugar, there are ants.’
Ada air, ada ikan.
Ada asap, ada api.
Ada nyawa, ada rezeki.

There is a formal pattern with these proverbs.

Sample Thai Exercises Using The Lexical Approach

Tone Patterns

Learning tones is a major challenge for Western students of the Thai language. The following exercise is designed to help them recognize tone patterns.

Draw lines to connect the phrases with the same tone contours.

ใจดี (cay dii) mid mid

สมบูรณ์ (sömbuun) rising mid

หากิน (hää kin) rising mid

น้ำกิน (nâa kin) falling mid

ไม่มา (mây maa) falling mid

ชาวนา (chaaw naa) mid mid

Formality

Levels of politeness and formality play a major role in Thai. This exercise familiarizes a student with levels of formality and raises awareness of which words are formal and informal.

Circle the more formal word in each pair.

you: คุณ (khun)

เธอ (thəə)

eat: กิน (kin)

ทาน (thaan)

I, female: ฉัน (chăn)

ดิฉัน (dichăn)

I, male: ข้าพเจ้า (khâaphacâw)

ผม (phöm)

Chunking

Thai is largely written without spaces between words. Using spacing to highlight collocations, however, strengthens the student's ability to think of the language in chunks instead of discrete lexical items. For the beginning Thai student, this additional spacing also eases the burden of trying to find the word units in a long stream of relatively unfamiliar symbols. Gradually, the spaces can be taken away as the student becomes more comfortable with the Thai writing system. Typically, chunks are two, three, or four syllables in length, and in slow, spoken form they are separated by a pause.

a. Typical text format

คุณพ่อชอบกินไข่ต้ม (khun phôw chōw kin khây tôm) Father likes to eat hard-boiled eggs.

b. Chunked format

คุณพ่อ ชอบกิน ไข่ต้ม (khun phôw chōw kin khây tôm)

Father likes to eat hard-boiled eggs.

Collocations

Many Southeast Asian languages such as Thai make use of semantic doublets, which are sometimes, but not always, rhyming pairs. Being able to recognize that these words go together increases the student's fluency and accuracy.

Draw lines to connect the words that go together.

เปรียบเทียบ (príap) compare ร้อย (róy) neat
เปรียบเทียบ (ríap) neat ใจ (cay) heart
ดี (dii) good หลับ (láp) sleep
นอน (nawn) sleep/lie down เที่ยง (thíap) compare

Collocations

Thai morphology is rich in its use of compounding. Learning which words can be used to form compounds expands the vocabulary of a student.

Which word doesn't go together with the word ไข่ (khà) egg? Circle the word that doesn't belong.

ไข่ (khà) egg ดาว (daaw) sunny side up
แดง (dɛɛŋ) yolk
ถนน (thanǎn) road
ต้ม (tôm) hard boiled
ลวก (lúak) soft boiled
ลูกเขย (lúuk khǎy) son-in-law

Collocations

Write 5 words that form strong collocations with the word ไป (pay) go.

ต่อ ไป (tòw pay) next

เข้า ไป (khâw pay) enter

เกิน ไป (kəən pay) too much

กลับ ไป (klàp pay) return

ขึ้น ไป (khÿn) increase

Personality

To express themselves adequately, students need to know a wide variety of words in a given semantic field. They also must be able to recognize the semantic field to which various lexical items belong. The following exercise helps familiarize students with the vocabulary needed to describe personalities.

Which words or phrases would friends use to describe you?

โกรธ (kròot) angry

โง่ (nòo) stupid

เป็นมิตร (pen mít) friendly

ขี้อาย (khîi aay) shy

ตกใจ (tòk cay) fearful

เงียบ (nĭap) quiet

น่าเบื่อ (nâa bya) boring

แปลก (plæk) strange

ฉลาด (chalàat) smart

ขี้เหนียว (khîi niăw) stingy

ไว้ใจได้ (wáy cay dâi) dependable

กระตือรือร้น (kràtyryyrón) enthusiastic

มองโลกในแง่ดี (มอญ lóok nay nĕe dii) optimistic

Sequencing

It is common to see sequencing exercises in reading texts, where students are asked to put events into chronological order. Sequencing may be used to teach lexis as well. In this exercise, students are asked to sequence events related to eating in a restaurant. It helps the student to see which events belong in this semantic field.

Number these words or phrases in the order in which they are likely to occur.

_____ กลับบ้าน (klàp bâan) go home

_____ สั่งอาหาร (sàŋ aahǎan) order food

_____ กินอาหาร (kin aahǎan) eat

_____ นั่ง (nâŋ) sit down

Positives and Negatives

In this exercise, students are asked whether words have a positive or negative connotation. What is valued in one culture is not necessarily valued in another. Students may not agree on the answers, but that, too, makes for lively discussion.

Circle all the words that have a positive meaning.

ดี (dii) good

น่าเกลียด (nâa kliat) ugly

ฆ่า (khâa) kill

ขโมย (khamǒoy) steal

รัก (rák) love

จี้เหนียว (khii niǎw) stingy

ใจร้อน (cay róon) hot-headed

ใจเย็น (cay yen) calm