

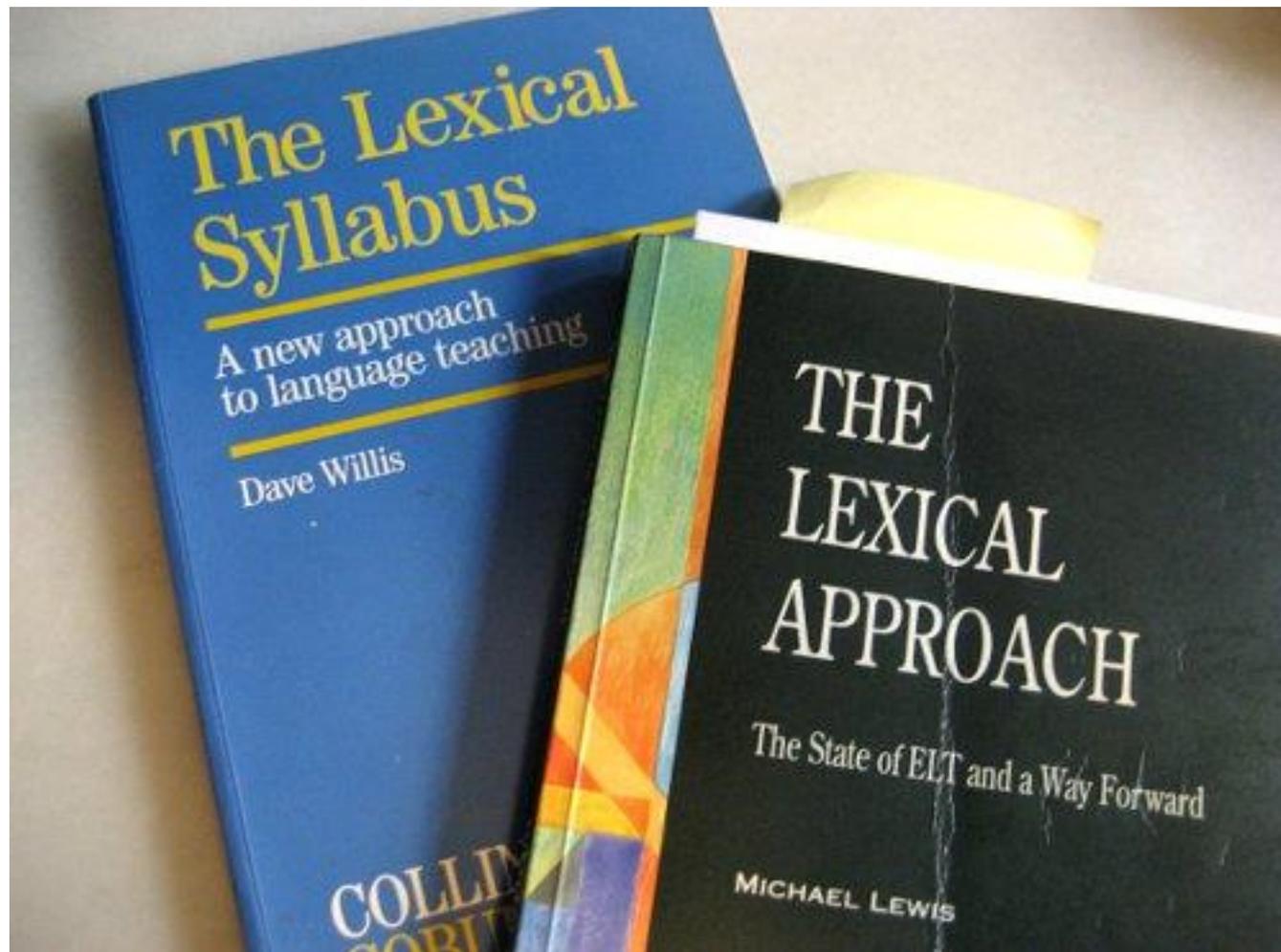
# Revisiting the Lexical Approach

Scott Thornbury

“Every word is primed for use in discourse as a result of the cumulative effects of an individual’s encounters with the word.”

Hoey, M. 2005. *Lexical Priming*. London: Routledge, p. 13.

Two elephants went on holiday and sat down on the beach. It was a very hot day and they fancied having a swim in the sea. Unfortunately they couldn't: they only had one pair of trunks!



# The Lexical Syllabus

A new approach to language teaching

Dave Willis

COLLINS  
CORBELL

# THE LEXICAL APPROACH

The State of ELT and a Way Forward

MICHAEL LEWIS

Willis, D. (1990). *The Lexical Syllabus* London: Collins ELT.

Lewis, M. (1993). *The Lexical Approach*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Willis, D. (1994). 'A Lexical Approach', in Bygate, M, Tonkyn, A. and Williams, E. (Eds). *Grammar and The Language Teacher*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Lewis, M. (1997). *Implementing the Lexical Approach > Putting theory into practice*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

True or false?

The lexical approach

1. prioritises words over grammar
2. selects words to teach on the basis of their frequency
3. promotes the learning of lexical chunks
4. argues that chunks promote fluency
5. argues that chunks are the 'units of acquisition'

# The/A Lexical Approach

- meaning is encoded primarily in words

Does this towel belong to you?

How often do you go to the dentist?

I wish I'd done French.

Exercise is the best way of losing weight.

Does this towel belong to you? (= possession)

How often do you go to the dentist? (= frequency)

I wish I'd done French. (= regret)

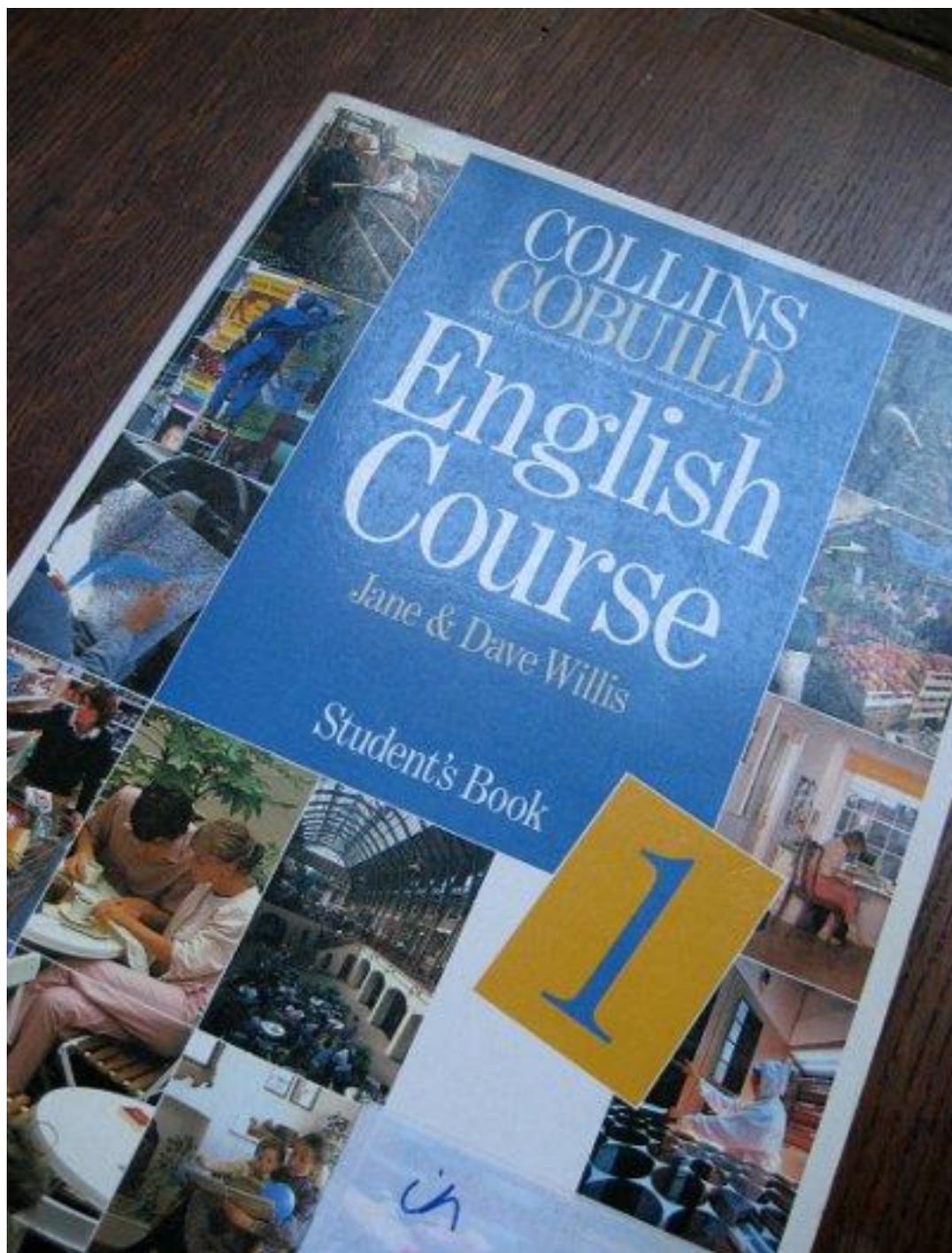
Exercise is the best way of losing weight. (= manner)

# The/A Lexical Approach

- meaning is encoded primarily in words
- the most frequent words in English encode its most frequent meanings

1. be
2. have
3. do
4. say
5. go
6. make
7. know
8. think
9. see
10. take
11. come
12. want
13. look
14. use
15. find
16. give
17. tell
18. work
19. call
20. try

20 most frequent verbs (Davies & Gardner 2010: *A Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary American English*)



1

in

go

1 move/travel

*We'd better go now.*

1.1 go to/out (of)/back (to) etc.

*What time do you go out to work?*

*I'll have some lunch and go back to work.*

1.2 go and ...

*Let's go and have some lunch.*

2 go to = attend

*I still go to college one day a week.*

3 go on = continue

*You go on another mile or so.*

*Don't stop – go on ...*

4 going to

*It said on the radio it's going to rain.*

---

Find out three of these things from your partner.

– where they went to school

– one thing they have got to do this week

– what they are going to do after the lesson

– how they go home after class

Compare your three sentences with the examples in the Grammar Book.

---

5 go takes its meaning from the words that come after it (go for a ..., go + -ing)

*Go for a picnic. Go dancing.*

---

# The/A Lexical Approach

- meaning is encoded primarily in words
- the most frequent words in English encode its most frequent meanings
- words frequently co-occur with other words (collocations and fixed phrases) and they often occur in particular syntactic environments (grammar patterns)

CONTEXT	ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500	FREQ	TOTAL 176,685   UNIQUE 6,477 +
BY THE WAY		18360	
ALL THE WAY		17666	
IN THE WAY		12960	
ON THE WAY		11792	
OF THE WAY		10470	
, THE WAY		9304	
ALONG THE WAY		6674	
'S THE WAY		5518	
AND THE WAY		4536	
IS THE WAY		4086	
. THE WAY		3714	
ABOUT THE WAY		2391	
JUST THE WAY		2239	
TO THE WAY		2082	
WITH THE WAY		1991	

Davies, Mark. (2008-) *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): 560 million words, 1990-present*. Available online at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.

---

BY THE WAY

---

ALL THE WAY

---

IN THE WAY

---

ON THE WAY

---

OF THE WAY

---

, THE WAY

---

ALONG THE WAY

---

'S THE WAY

---

AND THE WAY

---

IS THE WAY

---

. THE WAY

---

ABOUT THE WAY

---

JUST THE WAY

---

TO THE WAY

---

WITH THE WAY

“A language user has available to him or her a large number of pre-constructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments”

Sinclair, J. (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 110

**Table 4: Top 20 five-word chunks**

	item	frequency
1	you know what I mean	639
2	at the end of the	332
3	do you know what I	258
4	the end of the day	235
5	do you want me to	177
6	in the middle of the	102
7	I mean I don't know	94
8	this that and the other	88
9	I know what you mean	84
10	all the rest of it	76

	item	frequency
11	and all that sort of	74
12	I was going to say	71
13	and all the rest of	68
14	and that sort of thing	68
15	I don't know what it	63
16	all that sort of thing	61
17	do you want to go	61
18	to be honest with you	59
19	an hour and a half	56
20	it's a bit of a	56

O'Keeffe, A., McCarthy, M. & Carter, R. (2007) *From Corpus to Classroom: Language use and language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# The/A Lexical Approach

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- fluency is a function of the capacity to store and deploy, in real time, these high frequency lexical and syntactic co-occurrences

‘It is knowledge of conventional expressions, more than anything, that give speakers the means to escape from the one-clause-at-a-time constraint and that is the key to native like fluency.’

Pawley & Syder 2000, cited in Goetz, S. (2013). *Fluency in native and non-native speech*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.  
p.27.



“Learners would do well to learn the common words of the language very thoroughly, because they carry the main patterns of the language.”

Sinclair, J. (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford University Press.

Scott Thornbury

# Natural Grammar

The keywords of English  
and how they work



OXFORD

# Contents

page	keyword	page	keyword	page	keyword
2	a/an	70	know	138	still
4	all	72	let	140	stop
6	am' s/are	74	like	142	take
8	and	76	little	144	tell
10	any	78	long	146	than
12	as	80	look	148	that
14	ask	82	make	150	the
16	at	84	may	152	then
18	back	86	mean	154	there
20	be	88	more	156	thing
22	been	90	most	158	think
24	being	92	much	160	this
26	but	94	my	162	time
28	by	96	need	164	to'
30	can	98	never	166	to'
32	come	100	no	168	too
34	could	102	not	170	up
36	did	104	now	172	used
38	do/does	106	of	174	very
40	for	108	on	176	want
42	get	110	one	178	was/were
44	give	112	or	180	way
46	go	114	other	182	well
48	going	116	own	184	what
50	good	118	place	186	when
52	got	120	put	188	who
54	had	122	say	190	why
56	have/has	124	see	192	will
58	how	126	seem	194	with
60	if	128	should	196	work
62	in	130	so	198	would
64	it	132	some	200	you
66	just	134	sort		
68	keep	136	start		

“When a child can employ two hundred words of a foreign language he possesses a practical knowledge of all the syntactical constructions and of all the foreign sounds.”

Thomas Prendergast, 1864: *The Mastery of Languages, or, the Art of Speaking Foreign Tongues Idiomatically.*



# A GRAMMAR OF ENGLISH WORDS

ONE THOUSAND ENGLISH WORDS AND THEIR  
PRONUNCIATION, TOGETHER WITH INFORMATION  
CONCERNING THE SEVERAL MEANINGS OF EACH WORD,  
ITS INFLECTIONS AND DERIVATIVES, AND THE  
COLLOCATIONS AND PHRASES INTO WHICH IT ENTERS

BY

HAROLD E. PALMER, D.LITT.

What is... the most fundamental guiding principle [to conversational proficiency]? It is this:

*Memorize perfectly the largest number of common and useful word-groups.*

Palmer, H. (1925) Conversation. Re-printed in Smith, R. (1999) *The Writings of Harold E. Palmer: An Overview*. Tokyo: Hon-no-Tomosha, p. 187)

‘Speakers do as much remembering as they do putting together.’

Bolinger, D. 1976. Meaning and memory. *Forum linguisticum*. 1, 1-14, p. 4.

“Language consists of grammaticalised lexis,  
not lexicalised grammar.”

Lewis. M. (1993) *The Lexical Approach*, p. vi.

# Wordspot

go

1 The following diagram shows some very common phrases with go. Study the diagram and then answer the questions below.

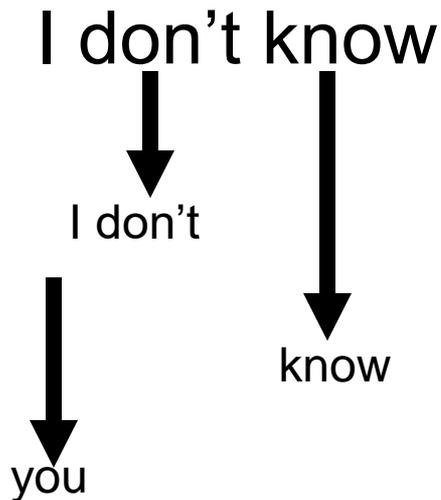


From Cunningham & Moor, 1998, *Cutting Edge Intermediate*, Longman.

‘The Lexical Approach claims that, far from language being the product of the application of rules, most language is acquired lexically, then “broken down”... after which it becomes available for re-assembly in potentially new combinations.’

Lewis, M. (1997) *Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting theory into practice*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications, p. 211.

# Unpacking formulaic chunks



- *That one I don't know.*
- *I don't know what's this.*
  
- *I don't understand.*
- *I don't like.*
  
- *I know this.*
  
- *you don't know where it is*

after Ellis, R. (1984) 'Formulaic speech in early classroom second language development.' In Handscombe, et al. (eds.) *On TESOL '83: The Question of Control*. Washington D.C.: TESOL.

# The/A Lexical Approach

- meaning is encoded primarily in words
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- **the learner's developing grammar is abstracted from their store of memorized formulae**

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## Frequency of formulaic language:

“A large proportion of the English language consists of **multi-word combinations**. For example, Britt Erman and Beatrice Warren (2000) report that they constitute 52.3% of writing and 58.6% of speech.”

Webb, S. & Nation P. (2017) *How Vocabulary is Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press,. P. 13.

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## 2 Listening: *What are you doing here?* (page 56)

---

### Conversation 1

A: Hello. Is this seat free?

B: Yes. Go ahead. Sit down.

A: Are you going to Glasgow?

B: Yes.

A: Me too.

B: Where are you from?

A: Germany.

B: Oh right. How long have you been here?

A: Not very long. I arrived in London last Thursday.

B: Your English is very good.

A: Thanks.

B: So, what are you doing here? Is it business or pleasure?

A: Business, really. I work for an export company.

B: Oh right. Do you enjoy it?

A: Yes, it's OK. I like travelling, so that's good.

B: Yes. Have you been to Glasgow before?

A: Yes, a few times. We sometimes do business there and I have friends who live there.

B: Oh, OK. That's nice. So it's both business and pleasure.

A: Yes.

‘The subjects reported finding the use of memorised sentences in anticipated conversations a liberating experience, because it gave them exposure to an opportunity to sound nativelike, promoted their fluency, reduced the panic of on-line production in stressful encounters, gave them a sense of confidence about being understood, and provided material that could be used in other contexts too.’

Wray, A. & Fitzpatrick, T. 2998. ‘Why can’t you leave it alone? Deviations from memorized language as a gauge of nativelike competence’, in Meunier, F. & Granger, S. (eds) *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. p. 143.

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- the learner's developing grammar is abstracted from their store of memorized formulae

‘Two systems co-exist, the rule-based analytic, on the one hand, and the formulaic, exemplar-based, on the other.’

Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 54.

‘There is a danger... that an exemplar-based system can only learn by accumulation of wholes, and that it is likely to be excessively context-bound, since such wholes cannot be adapted easily for the expression of more complex meanings.’

Skehan, *ibid.* p. 89.

How much is ..... ?

..... yào duōshǎo qián?

要多少钱

the room

zhù fáng

住房

just a bed

yī ge chuángwèi

一个床位

full board

bāo sān cān

包三餐

### Some useful expressions

I am a student.

Wǒ shì xuésheng.

我是学生

Here is my student card.

Zhèi shì wǒ de xuésheng zhèng.

这是我的学生证

Your charges are too high.

Nǐmen shōu fèi tài gāo.

你们收费太高

Can you reduce your charges?

Shōu fèi néng jiǎn dī ma?

收费能减低吗

Please make up my bill.

Qǐng bǎ wǒ de zhàngdān kāi hǎo.

请把我的帐单开好

“Phrasebook-type learning without the acquisition of syntax is ultimately impoverished: all chunks but no pineapple”.

Thornbury, S. (1998) ‘The Lexical Approach: A journey without maps?’ *Modern English Teacher*, p. 12.



‘There does not seem to be a direct line from prefabs to creative language... It would thus be a foolhardy gamble to believe that it is enough to expose learners to prefabs and the grammar will take care of itself.’

Granger, S. (1998). Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL writing: Collocations and formulae. In A. Cowie (ed.) *Phraseology: Theory, analysis and applications*, pp. 145-160. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (pp. 157 – 8).

‘The prevailing view today is that learners unpack the parts that comprise a sequence and, in this way, discover the L2 grammar. In other words, formulaic sequences serve as a kind of starter pack from which grammar is generated.’

Ellis, R. & Shintani, N. (2014). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. London: Routledge, p. 71.



‘[The] usage-based perspective implies that the acquisition of grammar is the piecemeal learning of many thousands of constructions and the frequency-biased abstraction of regularities within them.’

Ellis, N. (2003). ‘Constructions, chunking and connectionism,’ in Doughty, C. J. and Long, M.H. (eds.) *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. London: Routledge, p. 67.

“More research needs to be undertaken, particularly with regard to the part memory plays in second language learning, and whether (and under what conditions) memorised language becomes analysed language”.

Thornbury, S. (1998) ‘The Lexical Approach: A journey without maps?’  
*Modern English Teacher*, p. 13.

# Identifying chunks

- length
- phonology
- composition
- variability
- grammaticality
- idiomaticity
- function

## Typical structures include:

- adjective + noun: *stale bread*, or noun + noun: *junk food*, or noun + of + noun: *loaf of bread*
- preposition + noun phrase: *at the moment*, *in the end*
- adverb + adjective/participle: *completely wrong*; *densely populated*
- verb + particle (as in phrasal verbs): *end up*, *leave behind*
- verb + noun phrase: *make a point*, *launch a campaign*, *cause damage*
- noun + noun, or adjective + adjective pairs: *fish and chips*; *sweet and sour*

# Exploring and learning phraseology

A special module of Phrime can also identify potential phraseological units in texts submitted by the user. Detected chains are highlighted and hyperlinked to their dictionary entries. They can be edited, bookmarked and discarded by individual users. They can also be used to create vocabulary exercises which help students practice phraseology. Users can organize their text collections and exercises into courses and invite others to join them.

<http://phrime.tt.com.pl>

## **Feed ducks frozen peas instead of stale bread, charity asks**

It may be a favourite family pastime, but apparently going to your local park to throw stale bread at ducks is completely wrong.

The Canal and River Trust is launching a campaign this week which urges people to feed ducks with frozen peas and sweetcorn instead. Ducks are also reportedly partial to grapes, which should be cut into quarters to make them easier to eat.

People in England and Wales feed an estimated six million loaves of bread a year to ducks, which can cause damage to birds' health and pollute waterways.

Ducklings that are fed on bread end up being malnourished, while birds that get used to hand-outs can lose their natural fear of humans and may become "aggressive".

The charity warns families that bread is essentially "junk food" for ducks, and the remnants left behind encourage rats, disease and algae. Oats, barley, rice and vegetable trimmings are also acceptable replacements for leftover crusts, it advises.

1	<input type="checkbox"/>	throw + bread	13
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	stale + bread	67
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	charity + ask	3
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	local + park	127
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	frozen + pea	126
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	launch + campaign	660
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	feed + duck	29
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	urge + people	37
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	loaf + of + bread	535
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	cause + damage	1074

<https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2019/11/01/chunk-spotting-users-guide/>

“One should teach lexical phrases that contain several slots, instead of those phrases which are relatively invariant.”

Nattinger, J. And DeCarrico, J. 1992. *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford University Press, 117.

# 21

Simple Present Neutral\*\*\*

verb + to + stem (to + stem dominant)\*

verb + stem + -ing (stem + -ing dominant)

noun + to + stem\*

about how it one people permission that (pron.) there these (pron.) ticket  
to you

do do (?) get (in) go know manage set about

*How do you get in? How do people get tickets? How does one get permission to go there?  
How do you manage to do that? How does one set about getting there?*

1	2	3	4
		get there	
		get permission to go there	
		get in	
	does one	know that	
How	_____	get to know that	
	you	do that	?
	do	manage to do that	
	people	go about it	
		go about getting these	
		get tickets	
		set about getting tickets	

# Clusters in academic English

*such as*

*for example*

*make sure that*

*in terms of*

*the fact that*

*in other words*

*and so on*

*the importance of*

*the nature of*

*likely to be*

*the use of*

*a (wide) range of*

*has to do with*

*take a look at*

*at the same time*

*the way in which*

*in the course of*

*one of the things*

*in the case of*

*a large number of*

*you can see that*

Carter, R. And McCarthy, M. 2006 *Cambridge Grammar of English*, CUP.

Group A

TEA or COFFee?  
MILK or SUGar?  
HOW would you LIKE it?  
HERE you GO.

Group B

I'M not BOTHERed  
I don't MIND.  
HowEVER it COMES.  
YOU'RE so KIND.

from Selivan, L. (2018) *Lexical Grammar*. Cambridge University Press.

Taguchi (2007) “developed a dialogue-based teaching programme of grammatical chunks... consisting of an initial video presentation of the target dialogue, followed by choral and pair repetition of the text and rule explanation. Students then underwent structured drilling of the chunks within a communicative context, and finally they memorised and performed short dialogues that included the target sequences. ... The results indicated a substantial development, with the range and number of the chunks performed by the students doubling over the training period”.

Dörnyei, Z. (2009) *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 298-9

## 4 The Double Life of Alfred Bloggs

These days, people who do manual work often receive far more money than clerks who work in offices. People who work in offices are frequently referred to as 'white collar workers' for the simple reason that they usually wear a collar and tie to go to work. Such is human nature, that a great many people are often willing to sacrifice higher pay for the privilege of becoming white collar workers. This can give rise to curious situations, as it did in the case of Alfred Bloggs who worked as a dustman for the Ellesmere Corporation.

When he got married, Alf was too embarrassed to say anything to his wife about his job. He simply told her that he worked for the Corporation. Every morning, he left home dressed in a fine black suit. He then changed into overalls and spent the next eight hours as a dustman. Before returning home at night, he took a shower and changed back into his suit. Alf did this for over two years and his fellow dustmen kept his secret. Alf's wife has never discovered that she married a dustman and she never will, for Alf has just found another job. He will soon be working in an office as a junior clerk. He will be earning only half as much as he used to, but he feels that his rise in status is well worth the loss of money. From now on, he will wear a suit all day and others will call him 'Mr Bloggs', not 'Alf'.



### Comprehension and Précis

“As Z reported, through reciting those lessons, he gained mastery of many collocations, phrases, sentence patterns and other language points.”

Ding, Y. 2007. Text memorization and imitation: The practices of successful Chinese learners of English. *System* 35: 271-80.

## 4 jokes

Doctor, doctor, I've lost my memory.

*When did it happen?*

When did what happen?

Have you heard about the two men who opened up a restaurant on the moon?

The food was very good, but the place lacked atmosphere!

‘I’d like a mousetrap, and please hurry up, I’ve got a bus to catch.’

‘Sorry, madam. We haven’t got any that big.’

‘Police officer, I’ve lost my dog.’

‘Have you tried putting a notice in your local shops?’

‘That wouldn’t do any good. My dog can’t read!’

DGE

# Lexical Grammar

Activities for teaching chunks  
and exploring patterns

Cambridge  
Handbooks  
Language  
Teachers  
Series Editor  
John Thornbury



# Teaching Lexically

Principles and practice

Multi-award-winning series

THE RESOURCEFUL TEACHER'S

Seth Lindstromberg  
Frank Boers

# Teaching Chunks of Language

From noticing to remembering

ring a bell - in the bag  
by leaps and bounds  
clear as crystal - call to mind  
and as it gets

Lindstromberg, S. & Boers, F. (2008) *Teaching chunks of language: from noticing to remembering*. Helbling Languages.

Dellar, H. & Walkley, A. (2016) *Teaching Lexically: Principles and practice*. Peaslake, UK. Delta Publishing.

Selivan, L. (2018) *Lexical Grammar: Activities for teaching chunks and exploring patterns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# Uwe Kind



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zps0967z500>

[www.scottthornbury.com](http://www.scottthornbury.com)