WORDS: Just the tip of the iceberg.
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Abstract

How can we help students increase their communicative power?

It is not only the knowledge of words that matters, but also the ability to use these items in combination with other words in a natural way. We followed a step-by-step procedure for introducing collocations and ready-made chunks of language in the classroom, which can help speed the process of language acquisition. Activities were based on examples from current coursebooks of different levels.

The workshop aimed at raising teachers’ awareness on how to take a more lexical perspective in the way they approach the teaching of the language. Recent research findings in this field show that “language is much more lexical than is usually accepted, particularly when real-time processing is involved.” (Skehan 1998:29).

The impressive evidence of corpora has changed the description of English and has shown that most common concepts in the language are expressed through pre-fabricated phrases rather than through single words. “The advantages of prefabricated chunks are that they are very precise, require little processing by the listener/reader, and correspondingly carry little danger of being misunderstood.” (Lewis 2000:189)

Other findings in research on vocabulary suggest that the recognition of chunks is an important aid to speeding the process of language acquisition, and that the challenge is not teaching new or unusual words but expanding the collocational field of simple words that are half-known by students. “Depth of knowledge (of vocabulary) is learning more about the words that you already know.” (Mc Carthy 2001) Therefore, our aim was to make teachers
feel more confident in identifying these different kinds of lexical items, which in turn would allow them to guide learners to develop effective vocabulary learning strategies.

On the one hand, we explored how we can best direct attention to chunks rather than to individual words. On the other hand we showed a readily accessible set of principles to handle vocabulary, as "... routinized formulas and other sorts of prefabricated language chunks seem to play a large part in both acquiring and performing language."(Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:1)

During the workshop we enhanced the phrasal nature of language and the importance of noticing items which express complex ideas in a simple way. Most of the times it is not only the knowledge of words that matters, but also the ability to use those lexical items in combination with other words in the right way and at the right time.

We started off with a warm-up, a game of dominoes that introduced chunks taken from a reading at Proficiency level. We then discussed some useful and highly generalisable pedagogical strategies for exploring the word grammar of words, identifying maximally useful patterns, key words, collocations and lexical phrases that are frequent and predictable. We also considered how a principled re-introduction of translation can help exploit learners’ natural tendency to translate, this being an instinctive part of the way the mind approaches learning a foreign language. Through a variety of activities at different levels we showed participants that working from a lexical perspective is possible as from very early stages. These included:

♦ Showing: Teachers need to be proactive and help learners "see" lexical bundles.
♦ Identifying: Find the noun, find the collocate. Noticing chunks helps learning and acquisition.
♦ Selecting: Collocation dictation. The teacher's role is crucial in selecting collocations in and out. Learners store them as chunks.
♦ Exploring: De-lexicalised verbs and key words. This helps learners acquire tools to make their spoken English sound more natural.

List of references
Lewis, Michael (1997) *Implementing the Lexical Approach* - Language Teaching Publications

BIODATA
Mónica Rodríguez Sammartino and María Inés de Zabaleta are teachers with over 25 years' experience. Mónica is Co-ordinator and Headteacher at secondary level and María Inés teaches English at Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata. They have been running Teacher Development Courses since 1996. Their current research interest is Vocabulary.