

MAKING DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL LEXICAL COMPETENCE OF MILITARY STUDENTS

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Annotation: This article first defines the concept of lexical ability. In addition to emphasizing the importance of lexical ability in military students, measures and important recommendations for the development of professional lexical ability are given.

Key words: Lexis, linguistic competence, lexicology, inferencing strategy

Lexis is one essential component of language and language development. Limited lexical knowledge can lead military students to frustration and demotivation. To reach a higher level of development in the four basic communication skills, students should have a basis of lexis that allows them to do so. One of the factors affecting the ongoing development of communicative competence is neglecting the systematic teaching of lexis. Teachers' lack of knowledge of the lexical field has contributed negatively to this current situation. To meet these needs, this article reviews concepts such as lexis/vocabulary, lexical competence and knowledge and size and depth of lexical knowledge. It discusses new perspectives that could help language teachers develop conceptual knowledge to handle lexical instructional practice. Prior to tackling the concept of lexical competence, it is worth defining what competence is and how it has been viewed so far. The term competence has generated substantial controversy in the field of general and applied linguistics. The former regarded it as a sheer grammatical competence, that is, "the speaker/hearer's knowledge of his language" and the latter observed that this competence was more related to communication: ...a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This suggests an interrelation of the underlying aspects of competence for people to be able to succeed in their daily performance. In coherence with it, lexical competence deals with these components in relation to lexis, which has been embedded within the communicative competence and specifically in the linguistic one, where grammar is listed first and lexis second. It is believed that the order mentioned above has given prominence to grammar over lexis in English classrooms. In fact, some teachers teach grammar first then lexis. Teaching which gives primacy to form and uses words simply as a means of exemplification actually denies the nature of grammar as a construct for the mediation of meaning. I would suggest that the more natural and more effective approach would be to reverse this traditional pedagogic dependency, begin with lexical items and show how they need to be grammatically modified to be communicatively effective. Lexis should then be restored its primacy in language teaching and learning because lexical competence is at the core of communicative competence development. A simple definition of lexical competence is not easy to pinpoint because of the multifaceted nature of words. Existing definitions of lexical competence do not reflect the complexity of it in terms of its components- form, meaning, use- nor the relationships among them. Therefore, a more comprehensive definition is required. One that understands lexical competence as a cluster of knowledge (form, meaning and use of a lexical item), abilities and skills that a person develops and deploys in different contexts of communication. Learners can resort to their mental lexicons and construct varied relationships, which contribute to lexical size and depth by activating knowledge appropriate to the communicative purpose, the interlocutor and the social context. As this comprehensive definition suggests, lexis is a competence in its own right.

Military students who set out on the path to greater lexical competence must have clear insight into how their understanding of words is going to change. In the very first weeks of their university education, military students should be given training in how best to organize three activities, which will now be briefly dealt with in turn. Reception is presented as being in this context first and foremost a matter of identifying lexical units and establishing their meaning in the clause in which they occur as a function of the interaction with the other meaning-bearing words in that clause. But it is equally important to stress that lexical items are chosen in virtue of general communicative strategies and thus also make a contribution to the coherence and purpose of larger textual units such as sentences or paragraphs, and students need to be sensitive to this wider context of interpretation. In many poetic contexts, for example, all the potential meanings of a word are potentially in play, whereas in a legal document ideally only one sense will apply. These factors need to be considered even with vocabulary that is familiar to the student. However, where the student is ignorant of a word in a text, or notices something peculiar about an item she has already acquired, more skills are called upon. Military students should go through a number of inferencing strategies. They are encouraged not only to identify the word class(es) involved and to understand words and expressions in their clausal environment, but also to study the preceding and above all the following context, determining for example whether the item returns, or whether the context might contain a synonym or some other clue. Only after all these stages have been traversed and they have made an intelligent guess about the form and its meaning should the students look up the item in a dictionary, to see if their guess is right; if it is not right, they should try and work out where and why their reasoning failed. Students who work in this way find that the extra effort put into 'researching' the item aids the memorability of items and strengthens their ability to employ inference in the understanding of text. Production activities involve skills in selecting lexical items which will effectively convey the speaker/writer's intended meaning. At the same time, the items should be used correctly as to spelling or pronunciation. Alongside these rather obvious requirements, students also need to become sensitive to the particular combinatorial properties of lexical items within the clause, as well as the ways in which the use of words contributes to textual cohesion or is determined by genre conventions. These matters will return at greater length. Lexvaardig draws her attention to various compensation strategies that allow her to retain her fluency in speech or in writing by using lexical dummies (words like thingummy in speech or, say, phenomenon in writing), superordinate terms (piece of furniture to cover ignorance of the word couch), or paraphrases (advise someone not to replacing the unknown discourage). And by paying attention to coinages in the texts that they read, students will gain a feeling for the circumstances under which they, too, can dare to create a new word. Military students generally have limited experience in the use of dictionaries, and have at best incidental knowledge of what Internet has to offer.

Although dictionaries play an indispensable role in language learning, students have generally received little guidance at school on their use. Part of the freshmen's preparatory training is therefore oriented to helping them take maximum advantage of the various types that are available. Particularly with highly polysemous items, students need a lot of explicit help with deriving information from dictionary entries. Electronic dictionaries also have extremely useful search functions but the use of these, too, needs to be taught and practised. Armed with this background understanding of the three activities they are about to carry out (reception, production and resourcing), the students can now turn to the task of identifying the phenomena they will be studying.

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