

## Integrating Language Focus Activities into the Listening Classroom

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### 1. Introduction

Recently computer concordance programs, which are intended to create large databases of words from English and display all the examples of a particular word with relative ease, have proven to be of use to language teachers. Based on this approach, this paper will describe the design of language focus activities which aim at assisting Japanese EFL students in order to understand lexical phrases and improve their listening skills. A background of the activities will be presented, followed by some examples of how I organized activities and a brief discussion on some possible advantages of integrating such activities into a listening course.

### 2. Lexical phrases in language teaching

The importance of teaching typical and recurrent features of language has been gaining attention. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: 1) define such language use as 'lexical phrases':

"The term lexical phrases is adopted here to mean multi-word lexical phenomena that exist somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax, conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than the language that is put together each time."

Willis and Willis (1996: 66) also claim that lexical phrases, for example *as a matter of fact*, act like 'lexical items' and argue that a native speaker has a vast array of these items. Lewis (1997: 8-11) in his 'Lexical Approach', referring to 'multi-word items', also stresses the importance of teaching these items, which are categorized as 'polywords' (*bread and butter* and *by the way*), 'collocations' (*miss the bus* and *make a mistake*), 'fixed expressions' (*Good morning* and *No thank you, I'm fine*), and 'semi-fixed expressions' (*Could you pass...please?* and *What was really surprising was...*). Since lexical phrases are easily retrievable as units or frames, providing these phrases will encourage students to understand how words behave and how their meaning can be expressed in a wide range of contexts (Lewis, 2000). Since the opportunity to learn such phrases and their situational meaning expressed in language is not something readily available in EFL settings, the importance of providing students with a variety of language activities which focus on lexical phrases deserves serious attention. This allows students to store these ready-to-use word sequences in their long-term memory.

### 3. Lexical phrases in listening

As an instructor of a listening course, one of the difficulties in teaching Japanese EFL students is that they are more likely to decipher messages they listen to. They are often unaware that learning language is not a word-by-word translation but the acquisition of sequences of words (McCarthy, 1984). Like reading and writing tasks, listening tasks require students to understand words and their relationship with other words which frequently co-occur with them. This suggests that students are required to get involved in ‘an active process of constructing meaning’ (Buck, 2001). The traditional listening tasks commonly include series of practicing words and phrases through fill-in-the-blank and cloze exercises, etc. Although this explicit way of teaching has its own advantages, recent communicative approaches to English language teaching have placed much more emphasis on implicit rather than explicit vocabulary teaching. For example, focus has been placed on the importance of ‘prediction’, a main subskill of listening, which requires a good comprehension of various linguistic signals and an understanding of how words interact in context. Teaching a variety of lexical items with an explanation of the distinctions between spoken and written English has been highlighted as an aid in offering a representative sample of the language use in real-world communication. This approach has also been used in training students to listen effectively (Buck, 2001). Although lexical phrases are important discourse organizers in that they maintain the flow of conversations, teaching them as a group has been often overlooked in the Japanese listening class. Meaningful contexts to illustrate a variety of language samples, which are relevant to the students’ language experience, need to be made available to the students. This will help them extend their repertoire of patterns in appropriate contexts and improve their listening skills. However, the question arises as how to effectively provide the students with recurrent features of language use in a classroom context.

### 4. Using concordances in language learning

Computer technologies, including concordance programs, have enabled us to access and consult large databases of language texts and words more easily, and make us identify lexical patterns more objectively than before. With concordance examples which are always contextualized, the recycling of lexical items in a wide range of situations can be achieved in the classroom (Lewis, 2000). There have been many teaching methodologies concerning the use of such language databases as reference tools for students in order to solve their language problems. One of these is ‘data-driven learning’ (Johns, 1991) in which students observe how words behave in many tangible examples of actual usage and infer rules from them. The major argument against this corpus-based language learning style is based on the assumption that it is beyond the capacity of EFL students (Kennedy, 1998: 294). Aston (1995: 260) raises doubts about how effective this learning methodology is in the classroom, claiming that the approach “seems at odds with findings in those areas of computational linguistics which are more concerned with language learning than language description.” However, recent studies, such as those explained by Fox (1998) and Willis (2000), show that this may not

be the case, if this approach is taken with appropriate language examples and supplementary language analysis activities. Willis (2000) emphasizes the importance of creating a 'pedagogic corpus', which consists of written and spoken texts with transcriptions from a variety of sources, and providing students with 'focus on language form' activities based on the findings of their language analysis. Applying this method to English classrooms in Japan is likely to be beneficial to all the students.

## 5. Setting up language focus activities

The purpose of completed language focus activities was to highlight a variety of useful lexical phrases from the concordance examples obtained from the materials students had studied in a listening course. The aim of the activities was also to increase the students' awareness of important language features and their functions used in the discourse community. The extent to which the students could exploit these language features was also investigated. The following outlines the process of integrating language focus activities into a listening course

### Students

The students who participated in the activities were a group of Japanese second year university students who took a listening comprehension course. The aim of the students in this course was to improve their basic listening ability. They had studied English for at least six years by the grammar translation method in secondary school in which listening was not a skill that was given much attention. Therefore, most of the students were properly motivated to improve their listening ability. Before the activities were introduced in the course, the students had taken listening comprehension lessons with a variety of spoken texts and recordings with transcripts.

### Concordance examples

The language data based on the creation of concordance examples were drawn by the instructor from the samples of language texts the students had encountered in earlier lessons. They included the transcripts of the recordings they had already listened to for the purpose of improving their listening skills during the course. The transcripts contained monologues and dialogues in the form of everyday English conversations in various social contexts. These materials which were familiar to all the students in the class were converted to computer files as a 'pedagogic corpus' suitable for the activities. Concordance lines were taken by a concordance program from the corpus, with the identical key word in the middle of the line removed.

### Language focus Activities

The instructor selected some lexical phrases which would be useful for enhancing students' interpretation of discourse. The students were already familiar with most of

their meanings. The students were encouraged to identify lexical phrases and their patterns, and focus their attention on their functions. Students went back to the original texts to consult the phrases, when necessary. After having processed the patterns, the students engaged in some language activities to review them.

## 6. An example of activities

The following is one of the activities which were introduced into the classroom. The concordance examples used in the activities contain several kinds of introductory phrases. The aim of this particular activity was to explore how different kinds of introductory phrases were typically used in conversations. The first phrase which was shown to the students was *I'm sorry*.

twenty dollars worth of tapes. Sir, I'm sorry, it's too late. It actually ate the  
 book...) guaranteed for six months. I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. Paying  
 is. Sir, the rules are the rules. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do.  
 and I demand a refund. Look, ma'am, I'm sorry, but no receipt, no refund. That'  
 nt manager. You don't mind, do you? I'm sorry, but the semi-finals of the club c  
 der taking something off the price? I'm sorry, but it is the latest model and it  
 lo Anne, it's Chris. Listen, I'm really sorry but I won't be able to come for di  
 ite anyone else now. I know. I'm really sorry, but there's nothing I can do. It'  
 but I really wanted to go to Peru. I'm sorry but I'm not going to another  
  
 model and it's already in the sale. I'm afraid we can't reduce it any further. B  
 now that he only looks like Roger. I'm afraid I've never seen him before in my  
 an offer you is a 5% pay rise. And I'm afraid I can't accept that. I told you t  
 with your brother, aren't you? No. I'm afraid our plans fell through. Oh dear.  
 his is Ms Johnson of Link Plastics. I'm afraid we sent you the wrong parts by mi

The students knew that a basic meaning of the phrase *I'm sorry* is an apology and that this phrase is often followed by an explanation as in *I'm sorry I'm late*. They also knew that the same is true of the phrase *I'm afraid*. However, students had not realized before they consulted the concordance examples which contained *sorry* and *afraid*, that both basic phrases could be used to express sympathy when giving people information which they might be understood negatively. The students also became aware that the phrase *I'm sorry* often co-occurs with *but* and that without understanding this functional feature, conversations often sound abrupt.

In order to expand this first activity, the instructor now provided students with examples which contained other introductory phrases. The phrases were also followed by negative statements such as *I don't mean to be so unfriendly, but...* and *I don't know what you think but...* The instructor asked students in what kinds of situations these expressions could be used in everyday conversations. The instructor subsequently provided students with concordance examples which contained other introductory phrases which signaled something was

about to be expressed such as *The problem is...*

puter languages. You're right, but the problem is that no one here has ever use all right. We all make mistakes. Now what I want you to do is... you take th said that you could trade it in? Okay. What it said was that they agreed to fin ost it.... But they said they lost it. What I think they did was sold it to som ch. That part's OK. I hate spinach. What worries me is - where do I eat? Do

Since other common and important frames which had the same functions as *The thing/ point is...* were absent in this corpus, these phrases were also highlighted. After some discussion, which focused on the meanings and functions of these phrases, students were required to make a short dialogue which contained such expressions.

The following is another activity, with an extract from the concordance data, which was intended to encourage students to guess the missing word from the contexts. In the same way as in the previous activities, the students were asked to identify lexical phrases which were captured in the concordance lines. The students realized that the most common words, such as *in*, *on*, and *with*, contain a lot of useful language information.

ind the number of the question and fill [ ] the space that corresponds to the let enior. What kind of record has she had [ ] the past? I mean, does that really d u, how... how many times have you been [ ] touch with them? Oh, at least once a I'm away. I thought Bob was going to be [ ] charge. No, I think you need the expe nd (D), and decide which one is closest [ ] meaning to the sentence you heard. Th

to encourage TTE Aluminiums to deliver [ ] time would be a late-delivery penalty ith the family, and you're already away [ ] business too often. Forget 'La Tavern an. The winner of today's match will go [ ] to play in the quarter final of the W bstacles to your plans. Don't look down [ ] a colleague you feel is less intellig ty: your physical safety. I will insist [ ] proper precautions, such as wearing p

und fairly strong. I'm still concerned [ ] the academic. I hear she has had a partment. The Chief sent me to help you [ ] the investigation. Have you found a 7. Yes, we've gone through the contract [ ] our lawyers and there are no major Mrs Piper. I can't find anything wrong [ ] Peter. He has no broken bones, and while we're on the subject I am fed up [ ] everybody using my razor to shave t

### Summary of activities

As described here, there are a number of advantages to introducing language focus activities into a listening course. Firstly, and most importantly, students realize that there are a lot of important phrases in spoken English, which provide the major elements of everyday expressions. The activities help students develop their understanding of when and in what kind of situations they can use the phrases which they have explored. Secondly,

since students are offered activities from texts which they have already processed, as Willis (1996) claims, the activities assist students in expanding the knowledge they have previously acquired, and therefore increase their confidence in listening to and understanding English. It is also important to note that this relatively small and manageable corpus gives students easy access to the original transcripts they have previously listened to. In addition, the ‘fill-in-the-gap’ exercises, based on the corpus as a post-activity, allow them to have deeper insights into the meaning and use of syntactic patterns and therefore speed up the development of their grammatical competence (Willis, 1996). The students’ knowledge of English was well rounded due to the amount of first-hand language experience.

## 7. Conclusion and implications

In this paper, I have described language focus activities which provide students with ideal opportunities to understand lexical phrases by “reflecting on the language they have already experienced” (Willis, 1996: 113). The activities encouraged students to analyze language examples as ‘text investigators’ and play a more active role in thinking about how lexical patterns were used in context (Willis, 1996). The activities also offered a flexible framework of teaching lexical items, in that there were a number of ways the activities could be handled in the classroom. The methodology used in the activities was based on what Widdowson (1989) defines as a ‘process approach’, in which the focus is on meaning, increased fluency in spoken discourse, and awareness of the lexicalized ‘chunks’. In many traditional listening comprehension textbooks, the specific aspects of words and grammar are often presented as separate entities and the input is insufficient. As a result, this does not help students to consolidate their knowledge of spoken language into their long-term memory. Creating a language learning environment in which students can process a large number of language examples and increase their awareness of a variety of lexical phrases organized in meaningful contexts, should be given high priority in the classroom when trying to strengthen the students’ communicative competence.

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