

Original Paper

The Application of Lexical Approach in Teaching College English: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

In China, College English is a required basic course for undergraduate students, and the objective of College English teaching is to improve students' ability to use English in an all-round way. The author maintains that in order for students to exchange information effectively, they must be first of all equipped with the right tools for communication—vocabulary. The author observes that vocabulary is the biggest obstacle for most college students, who have learned the basic patterns and structures of English in their middle school, but their vocabulary size is very limited. It follows that greater importance should be attached to vocabulary in College English teaching.

The author believes that, in the current Chinese EFL teaching context, adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching is a practicable and effective way to improve students' ability in using English. In order to verify this idea, the author conducted an empirical study, which lasted 16 weeks. The findings support the author's hypotheses that college students do need explicit and systematic instructions on vocabulary learning, and that adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching is effective in enhancing students' lexical knowledge and improving their ability in using English. It is hoped that the study will shed some light on the question of how to teach College English effectively to meet the previously mentioned objective.

Keywords

Vocabulary, lexical chunks, the Lexical Approach, College English teaching

1. Introduction

In the field of EFL, vocabulary is seen as essential to language learning. West claims that “The primary thing in learning a language is the acquisition of a vocabulary, and practice in using it (which is the same thing as ‘acquiring’). The problem is what vocabulary” (1930: 514). Laufer (1992) finds that, for second language learners entering university, knowing a minimum of about 3,000 words is required for

effective reading at the university level, whereas knowing 5,000 words indicates likely academic success. In China, a national teaching syllabus is carried out, according to which middle school graduates are supposed to master about 2500 words over a period of six years. Consequently, the students who are admitted to colleges and universities usually have a relatively smaller vocabulary, which is a great disadvantage if they are to achieve academic success or even to pass the National College English Test (CET 4 and CET 6).

To meet the requirement of College English syllabus, and to ensure academic success, college students are expected to expand their vocabulary size to a minimum of 4,200 words, in addition to 500 or so phrases and expressions. As a result, most freshmen find they are bombarded with new words in their College English textbooks and the prospect of mastering such a huge vocabulary is a daunting task. They need badly systematic and patient guidance on vocabulary learning.

However, traditional ways to teach vocabulary in College English classes somehow fail to meet students' need. The common practice to teach vocabulary in College English classes is to present all the words and phrases once for all in one or two periods of instruction time and then leave them to students' care. Consequently, college students often find themselves at a loss as to how to deal with so many unfamiliar words or new meanings of familiar words and so many set phrases that are beyond the scope of their basic English textbooks.

Many teachers find their students tend to produce both spoken and written language containing unnatural-sounding elements, which grate on listeners or readers, as words that do not usually co-occur are thrown up together. Most students are frustrated to discover that they cannot communicate effectively either in spoken or written English, because they do not know the words they need. It seems that these students have not made much progress after they have learned the basic structures and patterns of English, or in other words, fossilization in English learning occurs. This is often called the "plateau effect" (Harmer, 1998: 13) in language learning.

College English teachers in practice have frequently asked the questions of how to help college students out of this "intermediate plateau" and "how to enhance students' communicative competence". They strive to try out different teaching methods and to encourage students to read more and practice more, but to their disappointment, they find that their students make little progress in their English accuracy and fluency. A possible and reasonable explanation is that, while emphasizing developing students' communicative ability, the teachers "often underestimate the 'communicative advantage' in developing a wide range of vocabulary" (Thornbury, 2002: 13).

In this paper, the author holds that College English teachers should help their students not only realize the "communicative advantage" in developing a wide vocabulary, but also be able to constantly explore with the words or phrases they have learned through using them. Students should be provided with the right tools --- words and expressions to express themselves before they can really use English to exchange information on various topics. In other words, great importance should be attached to vocabulary teaching, especially to the teaching of various lexical chunks.

The author believes that most of college students' English learning problems are rooted in three aspects of their background. Firstly, their English learning environment is input-poor, and the amount of authentic English the students have been exposed to is unfavorably inadequate (as shown in their inability to speak and write clearly and appropriately in English). Secondly, most of them have gone through middle school learning bilingual lists of words and they tend to focus on content rather than on form. As a result, they are not sensitive to pragmatic factors and usage. Thirdly, they are not fully mastering the words they are learning. Fourthly, although they may have learned a certain sum of vocabulary, it is likely that their productive vocabulary store is comparatively small due to lack of constant use of them. Finally, they are in need of training on how to learn and use English words and phrases effectively.

Taking into consideration of the above factors, the author believes it is essential for teachers of EFL to adopt efficient ways to teach vocabulary in College English classrooms. Teachers should always bear in mind that college students still need careful guidance in helping them increase their vocabulary so that they can express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wide range of situations. The author recommends taking the Lexical Approach to College English teaching.

The principles of the Lexical Approach have become increasingly significant in the field of SLT in the West since Michael Lewis published *The Lexical Approach* in 1993. The central idea of the approach is that lexis (vocabulary) should be at the centre of the syllabus. Within the Lexical Approach, great importance is attached to high-meaning content words, lexical chunks and the ability to learn by oneself in language learning. In recent years the Lexical Approach has an important bearing on the practice of vocabulary teaching and has attracted attention of many researchers and teachers in the west. In China, the idea of the Lexical Approach is gaining popularity among English teachers and researchers (Shen, 1999; Liu & Yang, 2003; Huang, 2001; Yan, 2003; Li, 2004). For example, Shen Yumin (1999) introduces the basic principles of the Lexical Approach and discusses the importance of chunks of language in EFL teaching and learning. Yang Yulin (1999) discusses the characteristics of the English chunks and suggests ways to teach English vocabulary. Huang Qiang (2001) demonstrates that one's collocational competence is significantly correlated with EFL proficiency through an empirical study of collocation acquisition by third-year English majors. Yan Weihua (2003) emphasizes that chunks should be systematically incorporated in the curriculum of EFL language teaching in order to enhance the students' pragmatic competence. Li Hongye (2004) points out the necessity of incorporating the production of chunks in vocabulary exercises.

In this paper, the author reports an empirical study conducted on adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching and claims that in current EFL teaching context, the Lexical Approach is practicable in improving college students' ability to use English in an all-round way. It is hoped that the results will shed some light on the College English teaching arena.

2. Key Principles of the Lexical Approach

Michael Lewis coined the term “lexical approach” in 1993, when he published his thought provoking book *The Lexical Approach*. The Lexical Approach has received increasing interest in recent years as an alternative to grammar-based approaches. The Lexical Approach represents a significant theoretical and pedagogical shift from the past in that it challenges a traditional view of word boundaries, emphasizing the language learner’s need to perceive and use patterns of lexis and collocation. Most significant about the approach is the underlying claim that language production is “not a syntactic rule-governed process but is instead the retrieval of larger phrasal units from memory” (Zimmerman, 1997: 17).

The key principles of the Lexical Approach are:

- (1) Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar.
- (2) The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-words chunks’.
- (3) A central element of language teaching is raising students’ awareness of these chunks and developing their ability to chunk language successfully.
- (4) Although structural patterns are known as useful, lexical and metaphorical patterning are accorded appropriate status.
- (5) Collocation is integrated as an organizing principle within syllabuses.
- (6) The central metaphor of language is holistic--- an organism; not atomistic--- a machine.
- (7) It is the co-texts rather than the situational element of context that are of primary importance for language teaching.
- (8) Grammar as a receptive skill, involving the perception of similarity and difference, is prioritized.
- (9) Receptive skills, particularly listening, are given enhanced status.
- (10) The Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected in favor of a paradigm based on the Observe-Hypothesis-Experiment cycle.

These principles give an insight into the nature of language teaching. For example, collocations and other lexical chunks are given priority in language teaching and learning, whereas grammar is viewed as a receptive skill, and receptive skills, particularly listening are given enhanced status.

Lewis (1993: 94) fully agrees with Pawley and Syder (1983) that “there are hundreds of thousands of such utterances known to the ordinary mature speaker of English”. He further points out that institutionalized expressions “will be a help to any non-native learners” and that “a repertoire of such phrases is an important part of fluency for the intermediate and more advanced learner” (1993: 95).

Nation (2001) suggests very specific methods for teaching collocations: (1) Idioms should be dealt with as if they were single words. The focus in teaching idioms ought to be placed on teaching their meanings as well as the explanation for their parts and background history. (2) Unpredictable collocations, like “take medicine” should be taught in other similar patterns that frequently occur (e.g.,

take a break, take a rest, take one's time). (3) Highly predictable or common collocations only need to be taught as part of the enrichment for the individual collocates which compose the collocations.

Other experienced ESL/EFL teachers, meanwhile, recommend specific principles that will enhance better acquisition of collocations. One predominating view they all share is "raise the awareness of your learners" (Lewis, 2000; Woolard, 2000; Hill, 1999). They also provide general guidelines for aspects of collocational knowledge teachers should highlight for students of different proficiency levels:

Researchers who conduct studies on L2 learners suggest a contrastive approach in dealing with lexical collocations with which the contrasting differences between L1 and L2 must first be recognized and emphasized to facilitate the acquisition of English-specific collocations (Bahns, 1993; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Gitsaki, 1999). Christina Gitsaki and Richard Taylor (2000) also provide a set of recommendations for teaching collocations in the classroom:

- (1) Instead of giving just individual lexical items, the new lexical unit should be introduced with its most frequent collocations;
- (2) Teachers should help students build a database of collocations;
- (3) References and resources of collocations (such as the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English (Benson, et al., 1997); COBUILD English Collocations on CD-ROM) should be prepared at school;
- (4) Brainstorming activities on collocations are highly encouraged;
- (5) Students should be also encouraged to use a more challenging vocabulary together with its context;
- (6) The use of songs and tales could be very useful for learning collocations.

Although most of the suggestions focus on the teaching of collocations, they have significant implications on the teaching of all types of lexical chunks. For example, the following ways of teaching lexical chunks are advisable:

- (1) Lexical chunks should be taught as one single unit;
- (2) A contrastive approach is effective to facilitate the acquisition of lexical chunks;
- (3) A new lexical unit should be presented with its most frequent collocations, and so on.

Lewis explains that "texts play a role in introducing interesting content, but also act as a major linguistic resource from which students can extract lexical items for study, expansion, and recording in appropriate formats" (1993: 106). Fortunately, the current College English textbooks widely used are featured by articles adapted or abridged from contemporary English publications, having a wide variety of topics about life, education, love, popular sciences, and so on. Therefore they are good for learners to explore for collocations or large amount of lexical chunks. For example, revolving around the topic of "a positive self-image is a key to a better life" are several related articles and short passages, and a large body of topic-related lexical chunks can be found in them. Once getting the general idea of the materials, students will not have many problems in understanding the meaning of most of the lexical

items as they are in a context. Usually students have not many problems with the content but they tend to overlook the form. Thus it is essential to make students aware of the lexical chunks in the reading material. The author believes that, once these materials are thoroughly read through and lexical chunks fully noticed and internalized, students will be provided with powerful tools to express their own ideas. It follows that using all the opportunities to teach chunks rather than isolated words is a practical way of improving students' all-round ability in using English.

In summery, nowadays the Lexical Approach has gained such an increased attention in language teaching and learning that Schmitt and Carter (2000) claim that such an approach intuitively attractive in spite of a lack of empirical support. Inspired by the literature on vocabulary and lexical chunks, the author believes that taking the Lexical Approach to College English teaching can enhance student's lexical competence and improve their ability in using the language. In order to verify this idea the author carried out an empirical study with third-year non-English majors. The research was designed in the light of the key principles of the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993). Cares were taken to make students aware of lexical chunks, to give them opportunities to identify, organize and record these chunks, to encourage them to go on using the language (the words and word combinations) they need to intake and activate, and to refine and empower their output through explicit instructions in College English teaching.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the study is to examine the effectiveness of adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching and to address the following questions:

1. Do college students at post-intermediate level need explicit and systematic instructions on vocabulary learning?
2. Is adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching effective in increasing college students' lexical knowledge and improving their ability in using English?

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Subjects

A screen test was given to 110 second year non-English majors in two intact classes in a comprehensive university in Shandong Province, and 58 subjects were selected for the study. 29 of them from class 1 were randomly assigned as the experimental group and another 29 subjects in class 2 as the control group.

The subjects, aged 18 to 19, were in the same department and all majored in international business. They were considered at post-intermediate level of language proficiency, for all of them had studied College English basic courses for three semesters before the experimental treatment period.

The screen test was a vocabulary levels test developed by Nation (1990: 264-271). The full score for this test was 72, and the result of the test showed that the average score was 44, the highest score was 62, and the lowest score was 20. Based on this, the students in each class were classified into three

groups: those who scored 45 points and above as high achievers, those who scored 30 to 44 points as average achievers, while those who scored 29 points and below as low achievers. Then from each class 29 students were randomly selected as the subjects of the study, each group having the same number of high achievers, average achievers and low achievers. The result of the t-test for equality of means showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their lexical knowledge.

3.1.2 Research Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study:

1. A questionnaire on beliefs about vocabulary learning;
2. The vocabulary achievement test (VAT) used to measure students' English vocabulary knowledge from three dimensions (passive vocabulary, controlled active vocabulary and free active vocabulary). The test consisted of three parts: the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation 1983, 1990) for passive vocabulary size, the productive version of Vocabulary Levels Test for controlled active vocabulary size (Laufer & Nation, 1999), and the Free Active Vocabulary Test for vocabulary richness in free written expression (Laufer & Nation, 1995).
3. The final exam used to measure students' progress in English learning at the end of the experimental treatment period.

3.1.2.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was modified on the Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire developed by Gu Yongqi and Hu Weiguang in 2003. It was used to collect information on the subjects' general beliefs about vocabulary learning. The questionnaire consisted of 12 statements, among which statements 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 were about the belief that words should be memorized, while statements 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 were about the belief that words should be learned through use. The students were required to respond to these statements by indicating whether they "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", or "strongly agree" with each statement (see Appendix II).

The questionnaire was first piloted with 20 students whose learning backgrounds were similar to the subjects before it was administered.

3.1.2.2 The Vocabulary Achievement Test (VAT)

The vocabulary levels test (VLT): The vocabulary levels test was used in this study to determine the homogeneity between the experimental group and the control group as well as to have students get a clear idea of their own vocabulary level so as to set specific vocabulary learning goals. There are several papers of VLT available, for example, Nation (1990) and Schmitt (2000). After studying the vocabulary list from National College English Curriculum Requirements (2004) and the VLT papers by Nation (1990) and Schmitt (2000), the author decided it would be proper to use the Nations' VLT (1990) as the test paper for her students.

The original paper of VLT consisted of words from 5 word-frequency levels: 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 words, the university word list (UWL) containing 836 words, and 10,000 words. According to Nation (1990:

258), “words in each level of the test are representative of all words at that level”. Here is an example of VLT format:

This is a vocabulary test. You must choose the right word to go with each meaning. Write the number of that word next to its meaning. Here is an example.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1. business | |
| 2. clock | part of a house |
| 3. horse | |
| 4. pencil | animal with four legs |
| 5. shoe | |
| 6. wall | something used for writing (cited in Nation, 1990: 261) |

In adopting the test, the author decided to drop the 10,000- word level because of its difficulty and low frequency. As a result, the adapted VLT paper consisted of words from 4 word-frequency levels: 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 words, and UWL. The test paper had 18 items in each word level and 72 items in total. The VLT only tested the number of words the students can understand without any clues (passive/receptive vocabulary knowledge), rather than their guessing abilities in the contexts.

The productive version of the VLT for controlled active vocabulary size (CAV): The CAV test was developed by Laufer and Nation in 1998 and was adapted for on-line use by Tom Cobb (<http://www.lexutor.ca/>). The author downloaded it and transcribed it into a paper-and-pen test form. The CAV test elicited target items from different frequency levels in short sentences with the items’ first few letters provided in order to eliminate other possibilities. The test-takers were to provide the missing letters for each word in each sentence, for example: I’m glad to have this *opp* _____ to talk. The test was used to see the relationship among the students’ receptive and controlled active vocabularies. Again, the 10,000-word level was dropped because of its difficulty and low frequency. There were three parallel versions of CAV test available on-line, and Version A and Version B were adopted for the pre-test and post-test respectively (See Appendix I).

The free active vocabulary test (FAV): The FAV test required the students to write a composition of no less than 150 words (the more the better) within 40 minutes. The compositions were analyzed with the Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP) measure (Laufer & Nation, 1995), which showed the percentage of words in the writing samples that came from different vocabulary frequency levels. The LFP has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of vocabulary use in writing and it has been adapted for on-line use by Tom Cobb (<http://www.lexutor.ca/>). The LFP is topic-independent, thus it is stable for compositions on different topics written by the same student, as long as these are of general nature and do not involve infrequently-used jargon words (Laufer & Nation, 1995).

3.1.2.3 The Final Exam

The final exam consisted of four parts. Part One was two-section vocabulary test. The first section was a fill-in- the- blank test consisting of 15 unconnected sentences that targeted 15 single words which were all selected from the required active vocabulary list exposed to the subjects during the course. The

format of this section was modeled on the productive version of VLT. The second section consisted of 15 unconnected sentences, each containing a blank for a targeted lexical phrase. Students were to choose the most appropriate phrase for each blank from a list of 20 phrases. All targeted lexical phrase and distractors were selected from the text materials they were exposed to. Part Two was reading comprehension, consisting of three passages selected from CET 4 English test papers. Part Three was a translation test. There were altogether five English sentences and five Chinese sentences, each containing at least one lexical chunk. Part Four was designed to test the subjects' free active use of vocabulary in writing. Students were required to write a composition of no less than 150 words on a given topic, and they were told the longer the composition, the better.

3.1.3 The Administration of the Instruments

The vocabulary tests were administered as a part of a normal class activity. The VLT (Vocabulary Levels Test) was administered in the first 45-minute period. After all the papers were collected, the students were asked to finish the questionnaire before they enjoyed a 10-minute break, without knowing there would be another test in the second period. The CAV (Controlled Active Vocabulary Test) was administered in the second period. At the end of the second period, all the papers and copies of questionnaires were collected.

The test of FAV (Free Active Vocabulary Test) was administered two days later in another meeting for English instructions. Students were required to write a composition of no less than 150 words (the more, the better) within 40 minutes.

At the end of the 16th week, another vocabulary achievement test (VAT) following exactly the same procedure was administered (except that the free active vocabulary test was administered as part of the final exam).

3.1.4 Treatment

Both the experimental and control groups followed the same syllabus, under the same English instructor, meeting twice each week for two 45-minute periods of formal instructions on College English intensive reading course, which lasted 16 weeks.

The author-investigator emphasized the role of lexical knowledge in learning English in and guided students to see their own problems with vocabulary learning through individual analysis of their vocabulary test papers, and also took one instruction period to communicate with them on vocabulary learning strategies. Only the experimental group received explicit and reinforced instructions on identifying, learning and using the lexical chunks, which began from the second week of the Fall semester. The messages on lexical chunks were incorporated into the regular teaching activities by both awareness-raising activities and systematic instructions.

3.1.4.1 Awareness Raising Activities

In the first week of the school term, subjects in the experimental group were each given a copy of an English article written by a native writer, together with a handout with explicit instructions on what to do before reading, while reading and after reading. The general aims of this activity were to develop

students' reading skills and to increase their store of lexical chunks. The more specific aims of the activity were to raise students' awareness of the idea of lexical chunking by directing their attention to specific lexical chunks encountered in the reading materials and helping them to analyze these chunks. It was also hoped to provide students with opportunities to discover chunks for themselves.

This activity was incorporated into regular classroom activity as kind of supplementary reading activity and it was observed that students enjoyed it very much, because the article was on a universal theme - childhood memory of bunking off school and the subsequent punishment. The control group was given the material for pleasure reading, whereas the experiment group received explicit and detailed guidance by highlighting the lexical chunks in the article.

When this step was fulfilled, the author carried out systematic instructions on studying and using of the lexical chunks in College English teaching.

3.1.4.2 Systematic Instructions

The systematic instructions were carried out in the following step-by- step way.

Step One — Selective Noticing. In preparing each new lesson, the subjects were asked to underline phrases or sentence patterns, such as “fall outside the scope of basic textbooks”, “making progress towards ---”, “It's not good thinking that anything will do” (College English, Book V).

Step Two — Presentation. The author made a point of directing students' attention to the lexical chunks in the text either by repetition or by translation whenever they occurred, believing that regular awareness raising activities like this should help students improve their chunking competence and fluency in using English.

Step Three — Consolidation. The author made a routine task of summing up the major lexical chunks occurred in each new lesson and designed exercises highlighting the use of them. For example, she would ask questions that required the target lexical items for answers. (“Some people believe that boys are more intelligent than girls in most areas. Is it so?” / “This is not necessarily the case”). The subjects were also frequently reminded to look up in their dictionaries the newly taught content words and to pay close attention to their usual collocations as provided in most dictionaries.

Step Four — Input into Intake. In order to help students convert their passive knowledge of these lexical chunks into active ones, the author asked each student in the experimental group to keep a notebook to record the lexical chunks they could identify in the learning materials. Next time she would ask them to pick out at least 10 from their recording lists to make up sentences with or to think of situations in which those chunks might be appropriately used.

Step Five — Intake into Output: Based on the belief that it was vital that students be given opportunities to use the vocabulary they had learned, and that they could be motivated to learn even more words to accomplish the task. The subjects in the experimental group were required to write a composition of about 150 words on a given topic, which was related to the theme of the text, and to use the lexical items they had learned as much as possible.

To guarantee that her subjects should follow this procedure, the author checked their notebooks every

two weeks. In providing feedback, the author made a point of commenting favorably or encouragingly even on those clumsily written ones, as long as the themes were good. The author was always glad to see that the subjects tried to express their genuine feelings, using the words, phrases or sentence patterns they were exposed to inside or outside the classroom. She would highlight appropriately used target lexical items in color pencil together with an asterisk put after them, and would write down some encouraging words on the margin, such as “Interesting”, “Keep on writing and you’ll do better”, “A moving story”, or something of the sort.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

3.2.1 The Scoring of the Vocabulary Tests Papers

All the test papers were read and scored by the same instructor, but were checked by another teacher of English. Each correct answer was given one point for the receptive/passive vocabulary test (VLT). Because the total number of items in the test was 72 with 18 items at each frequency level, the maximum score was 18 for each level and 72 for the whole test.

The productive test (CAV) had the same maximum score as the VLT (i.e., 72 in total and 18 for each level), but was scored differently because it was more difficult and the author held that a more sensitive measure for scoring to be used to compensate for this. For example, an item was marked correct when it was semantically correct, neglecting grammatical errors, such as plural form mistakes (e.g., “hen” instead of “hens”), or spelling mistakes indicating the test-taker’s attempt at the right word form (e.g.* “hungery” for “hungry”). However, using wrong derivations are considered as errors (e.g., a noun instead of a verb, or the wrong past tense inflection of an irregular verb) and got no point.

3.2.2 The Scoring of the Questionnaire and the Final Exam Paper

The questionnaire was designed using a five-point Likert Scale and was scored accordingly. For example: if a student chose 1 (= Absolutely Disagree) for a statement, then he got one point; if he chose 5 (=Absolutely Agree), then he got five points, and so on and so forth. The scores of all the relevant statements on one variable were added up to get the entire score for that variable. The mean score of a variable was calculated as follows: the entire score of a variable was divided first by the number of the relevant statements, then further divided by the number of respondents. Since it was an attitude questionnaire, favorable attitudes were reflected in higher scores. The raw data obtained in this manner were subject to further analysis.

The full score for the final exam was 100, of which 30 points for vocabulary, 30 points for reading comprehension, 25 points for translation and 15 points for writing.

In scoring the subjects’ compositions, the same instructor and one of her colleagues first scored all the compositions separately according to the standard of scoring CET 4 compositions, taking factors such as the content, word spelling, sentence structure and grammaticality into consideration. Then they compared their scores and exchange opinions where there was obvious difference and re-scored and then compared once again. Then the author gave all these compositions to a native teacher of English in her university and asked him to comment on the acceptability of these compositions as well as the word

choice in them. Finally, the author typed the compositions into computer for LFP analysis, taking care to correct spelling errors that did not distort the words and deleting words that do not exist in English. For each composition the on-line LFP program yielded a detailed analysis of the percentages of words belonging to the first 500 most frequent words, the first 1,000 frequent words, the second 1,000 frequent words, the University Word List and words not in any list. Because a single scores result is more amenable to statistical analysis, the author only used the scores beyond 2,000 to represent the subjects' lexical richness in free written expression.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The SPSS software was used for data analysis. The raw scores for Vocabulary Levels test, Controlled Active Vocabulary test, and the final exam were out of the total of 72, 72 and 100 respectively. The raw data for composition performance was out of 15. In analyzing the data, a descriptive statistics analysis (including size of the sample (N), Mean (showing the central tendency), Std. Deviation (indicating variability), and standard error of mean) for each group was conducted first. Then an independent t-test for the equality of means was carried out to test the significance of the difference between the two groups' mean scores in vocabulary tests, and the Mann-Whitney test was used to test the significance of the difference between the two groups' performance in writing.

4. Results and Discussion

In order to know the general opinions of the subjects regarding vocabulary learning, and to find out the possible problems existing in vocabulary learning among them, the author carefully analyzed the copies of the questionnaire turned in by all the 58 subjects and the results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups on the beliefs about vocabulary learning. In general, the majority of the subjects agreed that words should be learned through use, and quite a lot of them agreed words should also be memorized.

In order to determine the homogeneity between the experimental group and the control group, and to get a clear picture of their vocabulary knowledge so as to set specific vocabulary learning goals for them, the vocabulary test was administered at the onset of the experimental treatment period. The results were presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Mean Scores of Passive Vocabulary (PV), Controlled Active Vocabulary (CAV) of EG and CG at the Onset of the Experimental Treatment Period

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Standard Error of Mean
PV	EG	29	45.6296	8.04864	1.54896
	CG	29	45.2963	9.38827	1.80677
CAV	EG	29	20.9655	7.14884	1.32751
	CG	29	21.000	7.55929	1.40372

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test of the Mean Scores of Passive Vocabulary (PV), Controlled Active Vocabulary (CAV) of EG and CG at the Onset of the Experimental Treatment Period

t-test for Equality of Means							
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
PV	.140	56	.889	.3333	2.37986	-4.44220	4.1088
CAV	-.0.18	56	.986	-.0345	1.93202	-3.90479	3.8058

Table 1 shows that the mean scores for EG on PV and CAV were 45.6296 and 20.9655 respectively, with standard deviation being 8.04864 and 7.14884 respectively; while the mean scores for CG were 45.2963 and 21.000 respectively, with standard deviation being 9.38827 and 7.55929.

Judging from these figures, there seemed to be of little difference between the two groups in terms of central tendency (the average behavior of the subjects on certain tasks), variability (the spread of the behaviors among the subjects of the research). To make sure of this conclusion, the Independent-Samples t-Test was conducted and the results were reported in Table 3.

Table 2 shows that the observed t- values were .140 and - .18 for PV and CAV respectively, and the two-tailed significance values of the statistics were .889 and .986 respectively, both greater than 0.05. The results of t-test indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of their performances in PV and CAV tests. In other words, before the treatment was administered, the experimental group and the control group were homogeneous in terms of their lexical knowledge.

4.1 Detailed Analysis of the Subjects' Performance in the Vocabulary Test at the Onset of the Experimental Treatment Period

In order to investigate the possible relationship of the subjects' passive vocabulary knowledge and their productive vocabulary knowledge, a breakdown analysis of the subjects' vocabulary tests was carried out. The comparison of the subjects' PV and CAV test mean scores and the ratios for PV and CAV at different word frequency levels were presented in Table 3, which clearly shows that:

- (1) The mean scores of PV at 2000 word level was nearly 16 out of 18 (88.8%); while that of CAV was 13 out of 18 (72%), the ratio between PV and CAV at 2000 word frequency level was 81.9%.
- (2) The mean scores of PV and CAV at 2000-3000 word level were 14 out of 18 (77%) and 4.5 out of 18 (25%) respectively, with the PV/CAV ratio being 31.4%.
- (3) The mean scores of PV and CAV at 3000-5000 word level were 9 out of 18 (50%) and 3 out of 18 (16.6%) respectively, with the PV/CAV ratio being 34.3%.
- (4) The mean scores of PV and CAV at University Word Level were 6 out of 18 (33%) and 3 out

of 18 (16.6%) respectively, with the PV/CAV ratio being 52.3%.

Table 3. The Breakdown of PV (Passive Vocabulary) and CAV (Controlled Active Vocabulary) Scores at Different Word Frequency Levels and PV/CAV Ratios

Word Frequency	N	Word Type	Mean	CA/PV Ratio (%)	Variance	Std. Deviation	Standard Error of Mean
2000	58	PV	15.9630		2.03634	1.42700	.19419
		CAV	13.074	81.9	6.93781	2.63397	.35844
2000-3000	58	PV	14.3148		8.37072	2.89322	.39372
		CAV	4.5185	31.4	5.31097	2.30455	.31361
3000- 5000	58	PV	9.1296		13.13382	2.40636	.49317
		CAV	3.1296	34.3	2.79420	1.67159	.22747
University Level	58	PV	6.3704		12.76590	3.57294	.48622
		CAV	3.3333	52.3	9.69811	3.11418	.42379

4.2 A Comparison of the Vocabulary Test Results between High and Low Vocabulary Achievers

In order to find out students' problems on vocabulary learning, the author classified her subjects into three groups according to their scores in the vocabulary levels test (PV). Those who scored 45 points or above were ranked as high vocabulary achievers (High), those who scored between 30 to 44 points as average vocabulary achievers, and those who scored less than 30 points as low vocabulary achievers (Low).

Then a comparison of the controlled active vocabulary test (CAV) performance at various word levels was made between the high and low achievers. The results were presented in Table 4 and Table 5, which showed that the CAV test mean scores of the high vocabulary achievers were higher than the low vocabulary achievers at various word levels.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of PV Test Results of High and Low Achievers

Word frequency		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
2000	High	13.00	18.00	16.3750	1.55937
	Low	9.00	17.00	13.8000	2.57337
2000-3000	High	12.00	18.00	15.6562	1.65801
	Low	4.00	13.00	7.2000	2.57337
3000-5000	High	5.00	15.00	7.00	2.58329
	Low	.00	7.00	3.300	1.94651
UWL	High	3.00	13.00	8.4063	2.49980
	Low	.00	7.00	2.1000	2.23358

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of CAV Test Results of High and Low Achievers

Word frequency		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
2000	High	7.00	17.00	12.1563	2.52867
	Low	7.00	14.00	10.000	2.6667
2000-3000	High	1.00	11.00	4.6562	2.61027
	Low	.00	6.00	2.0000	1.63299
3000-5000	High	.00	7.00	2.5313	1.64580
	Low	.00	4.00	.6000	1.34990
UWL	High	.00	10.00	4.7813	3.1493
	Low	.00	6.00	1.6000	1.83787

A closer study of these tables revealed that, even with the high achievers, the distribution of their vocabulary knowledge was not even. For example, the minimum PV scores at 2000 and 3000 word levels were 13 out of 18 and 12 out of 18 respectively, indicating approximately one-third of the words at those two levels were not known. Another problem was that their productive knowledge of the basic words was quite insufficient. For example, the mean CAV score at 2000 word level was only 12.15, with the minimum score being 7 out of 18, and the maximum score being 17.

The problem was more serious with those low achievers. For example, the minimum scores at 2000 and 3000 word levels were 9 out of 18 and 4 out of 18 respectively, indicating approximately half of the words at 2000 word level and two-thirds of the words at 3000 word level were “not known” (Nation, 1990: 258).

The results indicated that on the one hand, most college students neglected or did not see the importance of the most frequent English words and they needed to spend time in studying intensively on those words. On the other hand, teachers should be aware of the problems their students might have and provide proper guidance to help students learn words at various frequency levels.

4.3 Data Obtained from the Post-test

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the treatment on subjects' vocabulary learning, the author compared the subjects' mean scores in the controlled active vocabulary test (CAV) and the final exam at the outset of the experimental treatment period. The results were presented in Table 6 and Table 7.

Table 6. Group Statistics of the Subjects' Mean Scores of CAV Test and the Final Exam at the Outset of the Experimental Treatment Period

	Group	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
CAV	EG	29	29.4483	8.87447	1.64795
	CG	29	24.7586	5.16620	.95934
Exam	EG	29	87.61	6.70	.91
	CG	29	79.90	10.21	1.47

Table 6 shows that that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the CAV test ($29.44 > 24.75$) and the final English examination ($87.61 > 79.90$). To determine whether the difference was significant, an Independent Samples t-Test was performed (Table 7), showing that the mean scores for the CAV of the experimental group was significantly different from the control group ($t = 2.459$, Sig.(2-tailed) = $.017 < .05$). In other words, the experimental group made a greater progress in increasing productive vocabulary size at the end of the experimental treatment period. The results of the final exam showed that the experimental group did much better than the control group and the difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.220$, Sig. (2-tailed) = $.030 < .05$), too.

Table 7. Independent Samples t-Test for Equality of Means of the Mean Scores of CAV Test and the Final Exam at the Outset of the Experimental Treatment Period

t-test for Equality of Means							
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
CAV	2.459	56	.017	4.6849	1.90685	-4.4422	4.1388
Exam	2.220	56	.030	2.3917	1.1663	-3.9547	3.8358

4.4 The Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP) Analysis of the Subjects' Compositions and Data Obtained from Their Writing Performance

In order to test the effectiveness of the treatment in improving students' writing ability (accuracy & fluency), the subjects' compositions were fed into a computer program for Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP) analysis. The results were reported in Table 8.

Table 8. LFP Analysis of the Two Groups' Compositions and Data Obtained from Their Writing Performance Before the Treatment After the Treatment

	Before the Treatment		After the Treatment	
	EG	CG	EG	CG
1000 words	84.79%	83.10%	84.77%	87.1%
Function words	54.51%	54.55%	47.46%	48.83%
Content words	30.28%	28.55%	43.11%	38.17%
2000 words	6.79%	6.88%	8.61%	6.21%
Academic word list	1.58%	1.60%	1.88 %	1.13%
Off-list words	6.84%	6.75%	8.45%	5.65%
Writing Performance	7.62	7.48	10.72	8.48
Length of Compositions (within 40 minutes)	133.6715 words	132.7832 words	171.5862 words	147.2414 words

Table 8 shows that in their compositions before the treatment, both groups had a relatively smaller free active vocabulary beyond 1000 word level at their disposal, which partly explained why these learners often felt that they “can’t find the right word to express themselves”. Whereas a comparison of their compositions after the treatment showed that the experimental group tended to use more words at 2000 words level and beyond in their free written expressions than the control group.

There was no great difference between the two groups in their writing performance and the length of composition (within 40 minutes) at the onset of the experimental treatment period. At the outset of the experiment, the experimental group came out with better and longer compositions within the same time limit, indicating that they were able to express themselves more clearly and easily.

In order to see whether the difference was statistically significant, the Mann-Whitney U Test for 2-Independent Samples was performed to examine the two groups’ writing performance (Table 9), and the Independent Samples t-Test was used to compare the length of compositions (Table 10).

Table 9. Mann-Whitney U Test for the Two Groups' Writing Performance

Ranks			Test Statistics	
Group	EG	CG	Mann-Whitney U	282.000
Number	29	29	Wilcoxon W	717.000
Mean Rank	34.28	24.72	Z	-2.176
Sum of Ranks	994.00	717.00	Asymp. Sig.(2-tailed)	.030

Table 10. Independent Samples *t*-Test for the Two Groups' Length of Compositions

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
6.027	56	.000	24.3448	4.03896	16.25381	34.43585

Table 9 contained statistics associated with the Mann-Whitney test for two independent samples. The Mann-Whitney U and the Wilcoxon W statistics yielded identical conclusions. As shown in the table, the significance value was .030 (< .05), indicating that the difference between the two groups was statistically significant.

Table 10 showed that the length of compositions by the experimental group were statistically longer than that of the control group (Sig.(2-tailed) = .000 < 0.01). In other words, the experimental group made bigger gains in their free active vocabulary than their peers in the control group.

The results indicated that the subjects in the experimental group were good at converting their receptive vocabulary into productive ones due to their constant practice of recording lexical chunks and using them in their own writing in their learning experiences. In other words, they had benefited from the systematic instructions of identifying and using the various high-meaning content words and lexical chunks. Therefore they had a larger repertoire of words or lexical chunks at their disposal and were able to express themselves better than their peers in the control group.

Then the SPSS software was used to perform the Correlation test. The Pearson Correlation between learners' writing scores and scores at 2000 word frequency level and Off-list words were both less than 0.01 ($p < 0.01$), which means the correlation was statistically significant between learners' productive use of most high-meaning content words at higher frequency levels and their writing fluency.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Do College Students at Post-intermediate Level Need Explicit and Systematic Instructions on Vocabulary Learning?

The vocabulary test conducted at the beginning of the present study was not only to equalize the experimental group and the control group, but also to "decide where learners should be given help with vocabulary learning" (Nation, 1990: 261).

Based on the breakdown analysis of the subjects' performances at different word frequency levels, it can be inferred that the subjects knew 88.8% of 2000 most frequently used words, 72% of which they were able to use productively in a controlled way. The ratio between PV and CAV at 2000 word level was 81.9%, indicating that the subjects were able to put into active use 81.9% of their receptive words at 2000 word level. As for the words at 2000-3000 word frequency level, they knew 77.7% of the words and were able to use 25% of the words actively. The ratio between PV and CAV at this level was

31.4%, indicating that only 31.4% of words at 3000 word level were converted into their controlled active words. The results also showed the ratio between passive vocabulary and controlled active vocabulary at 3000-5000-word level and UWL were 34.3% and 52.3% respectively. The relatively higher ratios between PV and CAV at these two levels may be attributed to the fact that these students usually paid more attention to these words because of their difficulty and low frequency, and the greater effort they made to memorize these words.

The PV and CAV tests results of both high and low vocabulary achievers gave a clear picture of where those low achievers needed help and where those high achievers needed improvement. Generally speaking, there were quite a number of these students who needed to be motivated to study intensively on words at 2000 and 3000 levels, as well as to expand their overall vocabulary size.

It will be a great advantage if teachers can find out what general beliefs their students have on vocabulary learning. According to the author's investigation, while most college students having realized the importance of learning words through use, only a small number of them could put this good idea into practice for various personal reasons, among which no pressure for doing so was a key one. Therefore, college students still need to be pushed to put what they have been taught into practice. The corollary is that teachers should take some effective measures, such as setting writing assignments, testing spelling regularly, to constantly remind their students of the need to practice using the words or phrases they have been exposed to.

Another problem was that although many students thought words should be memorized, they did not know how to memorize words efficiently and effectively. Therefore, students should be directed to know what kinds of words they need to learn and be encouraged to set realistic short-term goals for vocabulary learning. They also need to be taught efficient ways to keep the words in their long-term memory as well as efficient ways to learn through use as many new words as possible. In other words, post-intermediate students still need explicit guidance on how to expand their vocabulary size (both receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary).

4.5.2 Is Adopting the Lexical Approach to College English Teaching Effective in Increasing College Students' Lexical Knowledge and Improving Their Ability in Using English?

As shown in Table 8, the students' compositions were characteristic of too many low-information-loaded words (more than 80% of words on the first 1000 most frequent words), a small percentage of words from 2000 word level (6.79% ~ 8.61%), and a smaller percentage of words from Academic Word List (1.13% ~ 1.88%). In their compositions, around 5.65% ~ 6.84% of words off the list were used. These words not in the list may belong to words at 3,000 or 4,000 levels, the majority of which these college students had encountered in their College English textbooks. The general subjective impressions of the subjects' compositions were that there were many spelling mistakes, unsuitable collocations, and lack of cohesive devices such as discourse markers. There were also too many low-information words such as "nice day, nice clothes, nice classmates" instead of more specific words, which made their written expressions ineffective and not convincing.

It may be inferred that on average, college students, especially those who have finished studying College English basic courses, usually have a better command of the 2000 basic English words both receptively and productively. Owing to years of continuous studying and constant exposure to English, the majority of these college students have a comparatively better receptive knowledge of the most frequently used 3000 English words. When it comes to free active use of these words, the outcome is not desirable. The subjects had a relatively smaller free active vocabulary beyond 1000 word level at their disposal, which partly explained why these learners often found the words they thought they knew often slipped their minds when they needed to use them in their compositions.

The subjects' performance in the tests was disappointing, although they had learned about 1,800 to 2000 words before they entered colleges and had studied College English basic courses for at least 4 semesters when the vocabulary tests were administered. There seemed to be of little progress in their productive use of the words they had learned. In other words, although these students' overall vocabulary size increased (from around 2000 to more than 3,000 words), their lexical knowledge of the most basic words somewhat fossilized.

The results also revealed that these college students often neglected the studying of those high frequency words, especially those seemingly familiar ones. The comparatively lower marks of the two groups at the 2000 and 3000 word levels reflected that, learners tended to focus more on the content (meaning) than on the form (words, phrases or sentence patterns) in English learning, and that they seldom paid attention to the uses of those "simpler words". Even at 2000-word level where the subjects' performance was comparatively better, there were many spelling mistakes and grammatical mistakes (wrong plural forms or wrong derivation forms), indicating an inadequate knowledge of these basic words.

Therefore college students still need patient guidance on how to work on those higher frequency words. Students should be led to see the significance of these basic words in everyday communication and to be aware of the great communicative competence in knowing more about these words. Nation (1990) suggests that besides extensive reading of simplified texts and extensive listening to authentic materials, direct vocabulary learning should be also appropriate for high-frequency words. The author of this thesis holds that directing teaching of vocabulary, using vocabulary books like *English Vocabulary in Use* (McCarthy & O'Dell, 1994) and paying special attention to the various lexical chunks are efficient ways to expand college students' vocabulary size as well as deepen their lexical knowledge. Specialized vocabulary, such as UWL words or ESP (English for special purpose) words "can be treated in much the same way as high-frequency vocabulary because it is frequent within a specialized area" (Nation, 1990: 262).

The experimental group was approximately the same with the control group in terms of their VLT performance and writing ability before the treatment. At the outset of the experiment, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group both regarding their vocabulary knowledge and overall achievement in English (except listening comprehension ability, which was not tested),

suggesting that the treatment did cause favorable changes in the experimental group. The results demonstrated that the subjects in the experimental group got more used to paying attention to collocations, forms as well as pragmatic functions of basic words in learning. In other words, they were able to make the best use of the communicative potential of basic words and phrases, which in turn facilitated the retention of these words in their long-term memory.

The subjects in the experimental group tended to write longer compositions than those in the control group, indicating that they were able to express themselves more easily and fluently. A plausible interpretation is that explicit and systematic instructions on learning high meaning content words and lexical chunks brought about in the learners a sense of achievement (because they felt they did learn something useful) and evoked great interest in searching for more of them, thereby a benevolent circle of vocabulary learning was formed, which in turn has brought about a direct payoff on students' learning outcomes. Therefore, it can be said that adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching can significantly increase the lexical knowledge of non-English majors as well as help to improve their accuracy and fluency in using English in their free written expressions.

5. Pedagogical Implications

5.1 Necessity of Direct Teaching of Vocabulary through College English Class Instructions

It has been mentioned that the vocabulary size, especially the productive vocabulary being too small is one of the biggest handicaps for Chinese college students. Therefore they need to be taught effective ways to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wide range of situations as well as expand their vocabulary size. The corollary is that vocabulary teaching should no longer be treated randomly and the selection of what words to teach should not entirely leave to the course books any more. Intensive learning vocabulary is highly necessary for those who have a very limited threshold vocabulary, although learning vocabulary through extensive reading and listening activities is still necessary and advisable. It is strongly recommended to give students explicit instructions on vocabulary learning.

First of all, it is essential for teachers of English to know exactly where their students need guidance. College students, upon entering college, should be given a vocabulary test for diagnostic purpose, so that teachers can decide on what words to teach besides those listed in the textbooks, and what teaching techniques would be appropriate for different vocabulary achievers.

Secondly, specific goals in vocabulary learning should be set for students at different levels upon entering college. For example, freshmen should be explicitly informed that within one semester what words they are expected to master, and what words they should be able to use productively. Effective measures, such as frequent dictation of words, vocabulary tests, should be taken to ensure that each student achieve these goals.

The author believes that students will get a clearer picture of what are expected of them if they are familiar with the standards for the ability of knowing a word (see Chapter Two). With a specific goal to

learn and a standard of learning in mind, it is hoped that college students will have greater motivation to study English.

Thirdly, to improve their communicative ability, college students need to expand their vocabulary, not only those words at 5000 and University word level or beyond, for instance, but also those basic/core words at 2000 word and 3000 word levels, especially the productive use of them. Thus it is necessary to let college students know the concept of passive vocabulary and active vocabulary to lose their anxiety over too many new words to learn. Effective learning strategies should be taught and the significance of lexical chunks in language learning should be stressed. At the same time, measures should be taken to encourage and ensure students practicing using the lexical chunks as an effective and short cut way to language fluency, either in writing or speaking.

5.2 Necessity of Explicit Instructions on Learning Lexical Chunks

Lexical chunks should be taught and learned as one single word. Lexical chunks of various types are characteristic of native language fluency and direct learning of lexical chunks facilitates EFL learners' ability in using the language. However, identifying chunks is not always easy, and at least in the beginning, students need a lot of guidance. Therefore, teachers need to give students strategies to use outside the classrooms as well as to provide exposure to as much appropriate and quality language input as possible.

It is essential to raise consciousness and encourage noticing of lexical chunks on the part of the learners as early as possible, because "No noticing, no acquisition" (Thornby, 1997). For post-intermediate learners, teachers need not only to use activities highlighting lexical chunks, but also encourage them to seek large amounts of exposure to authentic and real language materials, either written or spoken (recordings, video tapes, etc.), and to notice lexical chunks within those materials.

It is also essential to help students with efficient ways to organize, record, and use the chunks they have noticed. Lewis (1993) argues that words which characteristically occurs together should be recorded together, not in a linear, alphabetical order, but in collocation tables, mind-maps, word trees, for example. He also suggests the recording of whole sentences to help contextualization of lexical items, and holds that storage of items is highly personal, depending on students' individual needs (*ibid.*).

5.3 Necessity of Developing College Students' Ability to Use the Dictionary as a Learning Resource

The goal for language teaching is to train learners to be independent learners with efficient learning strategies and learning techniques, and to be able to exchange information effectively. Out of the classroom, the dictionary is always one of the best learning resources for language learners.

The Lexical Approach suggests that developing the students' ability to use the dictionary as a learning resource, rather than as a reference work, a most important language learning skill (Lewis, 1993: 114). Lewis advocates extending the use of dictionaries to focus on word grammar and collocation range, and suggests that students should be required to notice examples given in the dictionary, observing and recording other possible collocations of the words in addition to understanding meanings.

Besides Lewis, many other linguists and researchers (Harmer, 2001; Summers, 1988; Scholfield, 1981, 1997; Hunt & Beglar, 2002) have stressed the importance of EFL dictionaries in language learning as a way to discover meanings and foster learner independence.

The implication is that college students should be guided to make full use of EFL dictionaries to explore for more useful lexical chunks as well as expand and deepen their lexical knowledge, rather than just take dictionaries as a reference work to turn back on when they come across unfamiliar words. In this sense, dictionary using should be part of learning activity.

5.4 Necessity of Making Full Use of College English Textbooks

Another most important skill the Lexical Approach suggests is helping students to identify lexical phrases in text materials, because “only by drawing attention to occurrences in text can learners begin to build up an adequate picture of language in use” (Lewis, 1993: 112).

Unfortunately, it is not an uncommon scene to see college students immersed in studying test-oriented books, casting their textbooks aside. It is a pity for them not to see the values of their textbooks in developing their ability in using English, especially for their writing ability. Only through texts and discourses can a learner encounter lots of supra-sentential linking devices, which are indispensable for the creation of coherent and cohesive written text. Most important of all, the proper use of words, phrases and institutionalized expressions can only be learned through context that a text or discourse offers. The implication is that college students should be motivated to make full use of their textbooks in addition to be encouraged to read more books or discourses that fall under their interests. They should also be taught to pay special attention to various types of lexical chunks as well as specific use of individual words, and make notes where necessary.

5.5 Limitations

Although the author claimed that adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching would improve students’ ability in using English, the experiment just tested the effectiveness of adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching on facilitating students’ vocabulary learning and improving their writing ability. In fact, “the Lexical Approach gives much more emphasis to oral vocabulary than do other approaches of recent years” (Coady & Huckin, 1997: 202) due to the fact that “ordinary spoken language contains a higher proportion of fixed expressions than does written language” (ibid.). Thus further studies are needed to test the effectiveness of such a method on college students’ ability in listening, reading and speaking.

Anyway, the experiment still enjoyed considerable validity due to the employment of the Vocabulary Levels Test and the Vocabulary Frequency Profile measures, whose reliability and validity have long been established in this area (Laufer, 1995; Laufer & Nation, 1995). The final exam could also serve to indicate some relations between students’ English vocabulary knowledge and their English learning outcomes since it was conducted very formally as a language achievement test on the whole university scale.

The author’s future aims are to cooperate with her colleagues to conduct further experiment with more

intermediate learners and to test the effectiveness of the Lexical Approach on improving students' all-round ability in using English. In the future experiment, the author will try her best to employ more lexical chunks enhancement activities and train her students to be more confident when learning and using them. She is to continue training her students to build more on what they know until a high fluency has achieved and to push her students more by introducing more vocabulary (for example, synonyms and idiomatic expressions associated with multi-word verbs).

With all its defects, it is still hoped that the study will draw teachers' as well as students' attention to the importance of vocabulary, especially the lexical chunks in various forms, in EFL teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

The major concern of the present study is to stress the importance of vocabulary in language proficiency and to explore the effectiveness of adopting the Lexical Approach on facilitating learners' vocabulary learning and improving their writing ability. Researches have found that "vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency" (Richards & Renandya, 2002: 255) and provides much of the basis for learners' all-round ability in using language. The results of the experiment showed that those who received the treatment (explicit and systematic instructions on learning and using high content words and lexical chunks) had greater gains in productive vocabulary size and demonstrated greater progress in their written productions.

The results of the experiment supported the author's hypothesis that adopting the Lexical Approach to College English teaching is a feasible and efficient way that solves the "high cost, low efficiency" dilemma in English teaching.

For one thing, the Lexical Approach highlights the status of vocabulary in language teaching and suggests placing much greater emphasis on students building a large vocabulary much more quickly than in any traditional syllabus (Lewis, 1993: 19). It stresses the teaching and learning of lexical phrases of various forms in order for learners to have a large repertoire of words for retrieval so as to express themselves more easily and fluently.

For another, the Lexical Approach views grammar as a receptive skill, which does not claim that grammar is useless in language teaching. For example, within the Lexical Approach, complex noun clauses and subordination, which are characteristic of the written language, are treated as lexical phrases, and the categories (connectors, intensifiers, auxiliaries, determiners and prepositions) frequently dealt with as grammatical matters, are viewed as words in their own right, in common with other words, having signification, de-contextualized meaning.

Third, the Lexical Approach attaches much importance to language teaching materials - authentic spoken materials and text-based written materials, and places high premium on the role of text/discourse in improving the language learner's writing ability. The Lexical Approach stresses the teaching of content words - nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs because they are usually information-loaded, and at the same time it advocates that what have been undervalued or

under-represented in traditional vocabulary teaching—adjuncts and connectors, intensifiers, auxiliaries and determiners, are characteristic of language at the level of discourse rather than individual sentences. Lewis believes that “the ability to write may be subconsciously acquired through extensive reading of text similar to that which you wish to produce” (1993: 101) and that the grammar of written English can be learned because “the process of producing written text is often a highly self-conscious, reflective, non-spontaneous activity” (ibid.).

This is good news for students and teachers of College English. Teachers should be more confident in studying their teaching materials and encouraging their students to get as much as they can from their College English textbooks. College students should also be encouraged to seek more opportunities to read extensively, to pay special attention to the features of lexical chunks and to actively acquire more and more such chunks both within and outside the formal teaching situation.

In summary, in a time when communication ability is becoming more and more important, vocabulary (words, phrases and other chunks of language), which is essential to communicate effectively either in spoken or written channel, deserves emphasis in language teaching and learning. The Lexical Approach highlights the communicational power of vocabulary in language teaching, emphasizes “extending the students’ repertoire of lexical phrases, collocational power, and increasing mastery of the most basic words and structures of the language” (Lewis, 1993: 48), and aims at fostering language learners’ autonomy in learning the language.

It is necessary for the author to make it clear that while advocating the Lexical Approach in facilitating learners’ vocabulary learning and improving their ability in using the language, the author does not claim it to be the only way for that purpose. The author does hold that in the present Chinese EFL teaching context, the Lexical Approach is practicable and effective to lead post-intermediate learners to higher language ability and fluency, leaving the “intermediate plateau” behind.

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