

Lexicals

What is a lexical?

Lexicals (sometimes called conventions) are chunks of language which native speakers conventionally use to express certain ideas in certain contexts. Lexicals are multi-word items such as collocations (words which tend to co-occur with certain other words, like “prices fell”), polywords (like “record player”), and institutionalized expressions (such as “Certainly not,” “Sorry to interrupt, but can I say...,” and even full sentences like, “Thanks so much for coming.”).¹

Why study lexicals?

Learning lexicals is one of the most efficient ways to develop the ability to express yourself clearly. Until very recently, most linguistics and teachers thought that grammar is *the* basis of language and language learning. “Many earlier researchers thought these prefabricated chunks were distinct and somewhat peripheral to the main body of language, but more recent research puts this formulaic speech at the very centre of language acquisition and sees it as basic to the creative rule-forming processes which follow.”² “Prefabricated patterns ‘form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation... Coming ready-made (they) need little encoding work’, and the speaker can ‘do the work of constructing a larger piece of discourse by expanding on, or combining ready-made constructions’”³.

How do we learn lexicals?

First we identify the lexical, then we analyze it, then we practice it and memorize it.

Identifying

This is a simple matter of picking out phrases or short sentences in a written or spoken passage of a native speaker, which you think might be useful to you in future conversation or writing. In the passage below, identify the useful lexicals and then compare those you identified with those which your teacher has identified (at the end of this handout).

RUSSO	I noticed that in your resume. Was your work confined to studio productions?
DAVID	Oh, no. We did a lot of field production too. I went out on assignments all the time. We did a weekly news program that was pretty popular. I'd like to tell you a little bit about it, if I could. It was called “Odyssey.” Maybe you've heard about the program?
Russo	No, I'm afraid I haven't.
DAVID	There was quite a nice write-up about it in the paper last year.

As you will see when you look at the lexicals your teacher identified (below), the lexicals comprise about 85 percent of the passage. As one researcher is quoted above, learning lexicals rather than individual words is a very efficient way to learn language and a very effective way to speak it.

Analyzing

Do not study only the words that make up the lexical. In addition to those words, study the words to the left and right of the lexical. There is no such thing as a word or a lexical that exists by itself; each lexical has its own grammar, and has to fit its linguistic environment.

Be aware of the usage features of a lexical. There is a difference between knowing the meaning of a lexical and knowing how to use it accurately. Some lexicals can be used in many contexts, but the usage of some other lexicals is highly restricted to one or just a few situations (contexts).

When you find a new lexical, try to identify its essential features. Study 1) its context in what you are reading and 2) its entry in one—but preferably two—monolingual dictionaries. To get a really good feeling for which situations the lexical can be used in, you'll have to look closely at its use in other contexts. Look for at least three different occurrences: compare its usage in 1) the passage you find it in and 2) the supplementary exercise; and you can compare these with its usage in 3) the definitions and samples provided in other monolingual dictionaries. (The best dictionaries are *Collins COBUILD Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*; and, for finding the differences between synonyms, *Longman Language Activator* and *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms*.)

Remembering

Practice

Make a sentence which uses the lexical in it. This seems too easy, and you will probably make a mistake or two, but it will be helpful because it will make you work mentally with the lexical, and when you work with

the language you learn it better. Don't just write the lexical ten or twenty times; this is too mechanical and doesn't require mental involvement, so you will forget it soon.

Another good method for practice is RECONSTRUCTION. Reconstruct a passage in which you have found some good lexicals. You can find the directions for reconstruction elsewhere in this section of the supplementary.

Review

Any method which requires you to recall and use the lexical is effective.

English-Korean lists

A very simple way to review a lexical is to write it with other English lexicals in a column on the left side of a sheet of paper and write a Korean equivalent in a column on the right side of the sheet. Then—in the library, on the bus, or waiting in the coffee shop for your friend—review this way: first, look at the left (English lexicals) column and try to remember the Korean equivalent for each English lexical. Right after this, look at the right (Korean equivalents) column and try to say the English lexicals.

Flash cards

Soon you will have collected several pages of these lexicals; some will be easy to remember, some very difficult. For a while, stop reviewing the ones you know well, and concentrate on the difficult ones. (At the same time, you are keeping a continuously growing list of new lexicals which you are learning.) Write down a difficult lexical on a flash card, and on the other side of the card write a sentence which uses the lexical. But leave a blank in the position where the lexical originally was in the sentence. When you want to review, say the sentence side of the card, and complete the blank with the lexical.

Other review methods are available. Some of these methods will be provided to you throughout this course. You can also go to a major bookstore and look at books by Tony Buzan, such as *Mind Mapping* and *Use Your Perfect Memory*. (Some of Buzan's books have been translated into Korean.)

Lexicals which your teacher identified

sth be confined to *sth* / studio productions / field production / go out on assignments / all the time / a weekly news program / be pretty popular / I'd like to *do sth* if I could / I'm afraid *neg* / a write-up about *sth* / in the paper / last year

Commonly used lexicals (frequently or in a wide range of situations)

sth be confined to *sth* / all the time / a weekly news program / be pretty popular / I'd like to *do sth* if I could / I'm afraid *neg* / a write-up about *sth* / in the paper / last year

¹ Lewis, M. (1993). *The Lexical Approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*, p. 95. London: Language Teaching Publications.

² Nattinger and DeCarrico in Lewis, 95

³ Nattinger and DeCarrico quoting Pawley and Syder in Lewis, 96

Lexicals exercises

Use the following procedure to learn lexicals effectively.

1. First, make sure that you understand the lexical thoroughly. Consider the context in which the lexical is used in the original text and discuss the meaning. Use your dictionary to help you understand, and to confirm that your understanding is correct.
2. Review the usage of the lexical as it appears in the source passage. Partner A makes a question or statement about a lexical. Partner B replies, using the lexical in the answer. (Do this for each lexical in the one section of the lexicals exercise before you work with the lexicals exercise sentences in that section.)

Example:

Partner A: (Focusing on *be a good chance*) Will David get the job at WNYN?

Partner B: (Remembering the Unit 1 dialog) He probably will. When David asked Mr. Russo whether he was going to get the job, Mr. Russo told him there was a good chance.

3. Partner A says a sentence below the lexical cues (using MLS).
4. Partner B replies to the sentence with an appropriate lexical. Partner A listens closely to check for mistakes.
5. After each item, Partner A checks **Possible Replies**, below the exercise. Read the reply to Partner B. (For some of the sentences you can use two or more lexicals correctly. However, each lexical has its own nature, and can be used only in situations which match that nature. The lexical used in reply in **Possible**

Replies considered the best one for that sentence. If your reply differs from the reply in Possible Replies, consider your understanding of the lexical again.)

6. Partner B repeats the reply which Partner A read.
7. After you finish one section, review. Switch and do steps 1 through 3 again.

If you do this without a partner, and if you don't do it orally, this exercise will be less effective. However, if you must do it alone, take the roles of both A and B.