

LOWER SECONDARY

Personalized Lexical Recording, Recycling, Retention and Recall for Lower Secondary Learners

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“If you want to forget something, put it in a list” (Lewis, 1993, p. 118). With this, Lewis emphasized the absurdity of teaching lexis in a decontextualized way through putting words and phrases in lists. In this article we want to discuss how it might depend on the nature of the ‘list’ whether a word can be remembered and made available for learners’ communicative needs or not. Dictionaries define a ‘list’ as “a series of names or other items written or printed together in a meaningful grouping or sequence so as to constitute a record”. Traditional vocabulary lists often lack both, the connection and the meaningful grouping. Unfortunately, many lower secondary English learners around the world are subjected to this established cycle of vocabulary teaching: copying lists of words into two or three columned vocabulary notebooks, arduously memorizing and rapidly forgetting them.

It is therefore not surprising that vocabulary focus during English lessons is particularly monotonous. Teenage learners often do not see an immediate need for such lexis, even though many regularly use social networks in English. Sadly, this language of relevance, naturally acquired through authentic input, tends to be neither appreciated nor exploited in educational contexts. Why is it that despite the world having changed and modernized in many aspects, vocabulary journals in numerous lower secondary English language classrooms still look the same as 50 years ago? What actions can we as teachers take?

We will share our experience of using “myLexicoMe”, a personalized lexical notebook developed especially for learners at lower secondary level to demonstrate ways to make lexical items quickly accessible and usable.

Why does it work?

It is generally agreed that without familiar words and phrases, learners will find it hard to comprehend what they hear or read. However, ways to help them accumulate lexis and store it in their memory successfully remains somewhat in a haze. That said, researchers have highlighted that vocabulary acquisition appears to be individually experienced. Dynamic models of language learning and variation theory, emphasize that understanding and remembering language concepts is:

highly complex

dynamic, and

experienced individually.

Therefore, lexis needs to be encountered in numerous communicative situations in order to become useful for and useable by the individual learner.

In The Lexical Approach Lewis does not only emphasize the importance of a lexical notebook as opposed to a two-column vocabulary book, he also points out the necessity of organizing it into topics to foster noticing multi-word chunks and word partnerships. More recently, Hoey coined “Lexical Priming”, which adds the notion of personalization. He argues that the encounters an individual has with words and phrases shape their representation in the brain. Only personalized variations of the stored items make them meaningful and thus memorable. Nevertheless, the past 15 years have not really provided clarity as to what a lexical notebook may look like and how it may be used, especially when it comes to lower secondary aged learners.

How does it work?

In contrast to the ‘one size fits nobody’ strategy of traditional vocabulary lists in course books or vocabulary journals, “myLexicoIe” is a personalized journal to collect and categorize words and phrases catering to learners’ readiness and immediate communicative needs. The key aim of “myLexicoIe” is to encourage learners to revisit their lexical collections and to supplement them during the course of the learning process.

This means that “myLexicoIe” is not discontinued after a course, as often occurs with vocabulary journals; instead, it is used over several years of learning, becoming richer the more words and phrases are added. Another goal of “myLexicoIe” is to foster personalization: learners are encouraged to include the words and phrases they personally would like to remember while they are taught key vocabulary for their level. In this way, a class can work on the same topic at different levels, which also brings in an element of differentiated learning.

Traditional vocabulary journals are used to record words and to study them; then they are put aside. The aim of “myLexicoIe” is to be used to scaffold conversation and writing continuously and with increasing intensity. Therefore, learners keep an index to find topics quickly when needed.

Ideally “myLexicoIe” is a ring binder with flexibility to add topics easily. However, the second best option may be A4 exercise-books where templates can be glued in. Although this creates a less flexible situation, the double pages provide ample space to be used effectively.

Depending on topic and content, words and phrases considered useful for conversational needs can be collected in creative ways:

- mind-maps or graphic organizers
- picture dictionaries to scaffold through illustration
- dialogue frames for more sequenced designs
- meaningful lists of grammar words to ‘pimp’ texts

The words and phrases in “myLexicoIe” usually appear in word-partnerships or lexical chunks rather than isolated words. Semi-fixed and fixed phrases such as turn-taking exponents can come in separate lists while contextualized phrases are added to the topic where they create meaning (see Figure 2). This may even result in double or multiple listing in various places, which reflects Hoey’s theory of “Lexical Priming”. With each new encounter and meaning-making the learners create new layers of understanding. In this way, lexis becomes better connected and readily accessible, which in turn contributes to accelerated production.

The name “myLexicoIes” includes “lexis” and “notebook”, capturing the idea of an ‘enjoyable’ container: the “cone”. Many lower secondary learners like ice-cream and the association with the cone as the ‘holder’ of lexis in a personalized notebook is engaging, especially for young teenagers. See Figure 1, opposite.

When starting to learn a new language, exponents “Do you like...?”, “Would you like...?”, “I like...”, are highly communicative. We talk about flavors, colors and even shapes and these examples are typical for teenage learners’ LexicoIes:

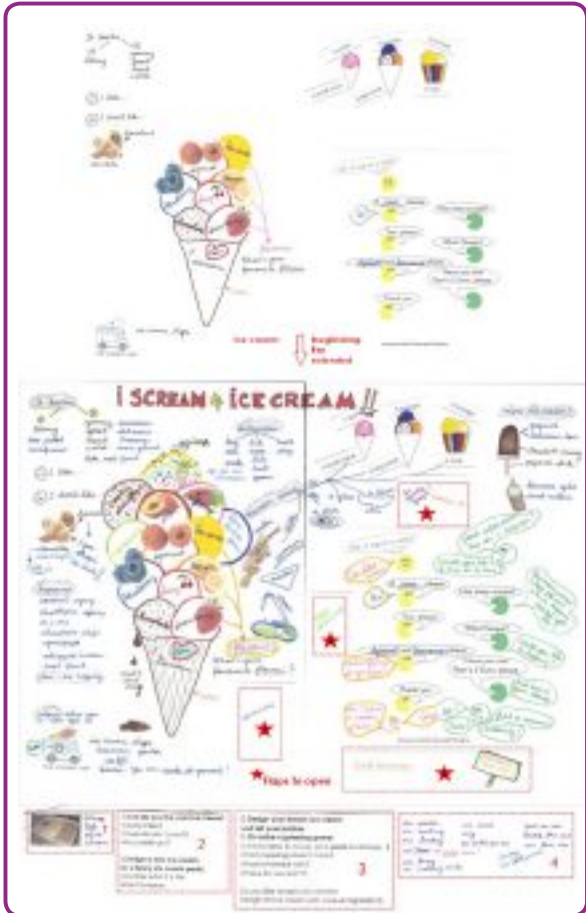


Figure 1

Gradually lexis and tasks are added and so similar topics are revised and used in different meaningful contexts. Mind-maps grow over time and pages become too small in which case, flaps can be added on the sides.

LexicoIes can also be used electronically – whether it is traditional paper and pencil or on computer, they always start small and develop gradually. In the first version of the electronic mind-map, the teacher may provide a starting point. During classroom discussion about what chores learners do at home, each adds what is relevant for them. The teacher collects ideas on the interactive whiteboard and can send a complete version to all learners. This can include a target lexical set and so individuals add these core items to their personalized lists and thereby extend their lexical range.

You can guide your learners back to certain topics when new functions are needed. First use of the mind-map on household chores will be in the present tense then an additional application can be added in a dialogue requiring the present perfect tense.

Figure 2 shows an advanced version of the ‘chores’ mind-map, which actually started very small.

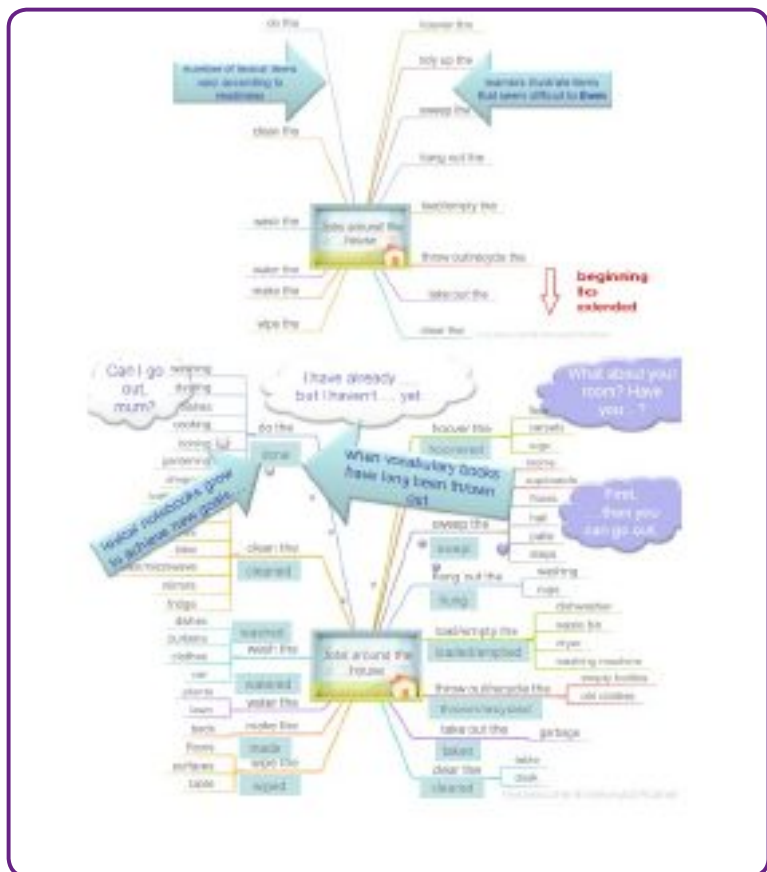


Figure 2

SMILE PIMP YOUR TEXT SMILE

How can you do things?
Use the verbs in box A and the adverbs in box B to create meaningful sentences!
Examples:
She ran in a friendly way - she smiled at me in a friendly way.
She sang loudly - they went dancing loudly.

Box A	run	smile
	work	laugh
	cry	swim
	shout	sing
	swear	play
	walk	hurt

Box B

beautifully, happily, loudly, mostly, well, quickly, cleverly, terribly, sadly, quietly, badly, slowly, stupidly

Describing adjectives and adverbs
Use the adverbs in box A and the adjectives/adverbs in box B to create meaningful sentences!
Examples:
He walked extremely slowly - He walked extremely slowly.
The video was incredibly amusing - The video was incredibly amusing.

Box A	absolutely	interesting	dangerous	late
	extremely	slowly	boring	happy
	hardly	small	fixed	fast
	incredibly	bad	stupid	smart
	nearly	good	amazing	bored
	really	sad	exciting	excited
	terribly	quiet	lonely	confused
			quickly	unfair

myLexicoIe © Newbold-Walker

Figure 3

“Pimp your text” pages include useful language to make texts more elaborate. The example in Figure 3 can supplement any descriptive or narrative text and be used during the first draft or in the editing stage.

Semi-fixed and fixed phrases related to certain text types are often recorded collectively in “myLexicoIe” and subsequently used in written texts. Whenever texts follow a fixed sequence, graphic organizers can be used to create frames. For more examples of mind-maps, dialogue frames and pimp-your-text solutions see <http://www.palm-edu.eu/palm4teachers>

To recap, traditional vocabulary journals are linear copies of word lists found in course books. They are written quickly and corrected in a short time. However, the layout does not allow for future additions or personalization.

Lexical notebooks, like “myLexicoIe”, make use of dynamic graphics such as mind-maps and picture dictionaries. They organize lexis in meaningful ways and create categories or sequences. Their format allows personalized entries in addition to core items, which reflects lower secondary learners’ needs and readiness. Recycling in communicative activities makes entries in “myLexicoIe” memorable. This increases retention and accessibility which are crucial elements of fluency and the wider goal of communicative language learning for lower secondary teenagers.

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