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## IMPLEMENTING THE LEXICAL APPROACH IN AN INTEGRATED ENGLISH E-COURSE

**Abstract:** The purpose of this work is to observe and analyze if a group of thirty students of an integrated English e-course could benefit from the explicit teaching of five lexical groups and the pedagogical principles behind the Lexical Approach. These low-intermediate students (CEFR, A2) took an Integrated English e-course at the School of Modern Languages, University of Costa Rica (UCR). To begin with, the target group took a short diagnostic test related to the five lexical groups to determine their prior knowledge on such aspect. To assess the level of improvement reached, the students received explicit instruction on five lexical groups as part of the writing components of this team-taught course. After this, the instructor revised 120 compositions (60 drafts and 60 final versions). Then, after intensive practice through a series of activities based on the Lexical Approach, they took a final instrument to measure how much they have learned throughout the virtual course. The results show a positive effect of explicit instruction of lexical units on student's writing outcomes and their post test.

**Keywords:** The Lexical Approach, lexical chunks, integrated English courses, teaching of writing, sample e-lesson.

### 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, increasing productive vocabulary is a relevant objective among EFL or ESP students in academic contexts. This is not an easy task especially when the population varies in terms of previous knowledge on the target language and the level of motivation. In relation to this, Gairns and Redman (1986) indicate that this issue worsens “when the lexical needs of the learner would seem to be incongruous with his general language level” (p. 59). Thus, for learners who need to recognize, understand, and eventually incorporate productive vocabulary as part of various tasks, instructors must implement appealing tasks that meet the learners' needs, wants, and lacks to help them improve their lexicon.

The main objective of this study is to observe the improvement reached in regard to the understanding and correct use of a series of five types of contextualized lexical groups: (1) collocations, (2) idioms, (3) word forms, (4) polywords, and (5) multi-word verbs. To do this, students were exposed to various reading texts, exercises, and virtual lessons that target the lexico-grammatical units aforementioned. Also, the instructor implemented two assessment instruments as well as two writing tasks to assess the lexical units studied explicitly.

#### 1.1 Research questions of this exploratory study

This exploratory study has the following three research questions:

- a. Can the target group be able to benefit from the principles behind the Lexical Approach?
- b. To what extent will this population expand on their comprehension of five lexical groups in order to enrich their writing at a low-intermediate level (CEFR, A2)?
- c. Will learners' post test show any improvement in relation to their pre test?

## 2. Review of Literature

No one can deny that EFL learners are always concerned about the amount of productive vocabulary they get acquainted with and recognize in authentic texts without depending too much on the use of dictionaries. There is a constant call for learning, assimilating, and recognizing new lexicon. Thus, different methods to EFL contexts address vocabulary instruction in various forms, and one of the most significant approaches is the Lexical Approach. This method was published by Michael Lewis and views lexicon from the perspective of larger and meaningful chunks or lexico-grammatical units to be seen in context rather than headwords in isolation (Lewis, 1997, p.7). Teda (2014) explains that:

[The] Lexical Approach is an instructional paradigm which bases its principles on the lexico-grammatical units of a language. In this instructional model the lexico-grammatical units are the starting point of the syllabus development. The tasks are geared to improve learners' lexical knowledge. Within the Lexical Approach paradigm, the ability to chunk language successfully is central to the theoretical understanding of how language works. Therefore, introducing the idea of chunking to learners, and providing them with materials which encourage the identification of chunks is one of the central activities of language learning (p.5-6).

Learners, thus, do not focus on isolated lists of words; on the contrary, they are trained to analyze more complex bits (chunks) of language in context from authentic texts. This is particularly beneficial in EFL populations that frequently deal with various types of academic genres.

Regardless of a given teaching method or approach, there are five principles that constitute the basis for the teaching of vocabulary. Coxhead (2006) lists the following:

- **The frequency principle:** learners benefit from focusing on high-frequently words taken from academic word lists (AWL); this is crucial in content-based instruction.
- **The repetition principle:** the more learners repeat academic words in context, the easier it becomes to internalize their meanings, form, and use. For this to occur, learners must "notice words in the text so they do not miss the repetition" (p.19).
- **The principle of spaced retrieval:** without depending on a dictionary, learners should be able to recall words they have encountered before. This is important because "the process of thinking deeply and remembering strengthens a learner's knowledge of a word" (Coxhead, p.20). To reach this level of processing and autonomy, various mnemonic devices may be implemented to recall vocabulary as well as exercises, word banks, AWL lists, tests, and the like.
- **The principle of avoiding interference:** when learning certain opposite words at the same time, learners may confuse them due to their similar spelling and pronunciation. So, instructors should only focus on one word instead of presenting opposites, especially in extensive vocabulary lists.

- **The generation principle:** learners will benefit from seeing words in new contexts; for example, they will easily recall and use a given concept in written tasks (writing a composition, editorial or essay) or speaking activities if they encounter it in a video segment or reading text (p.18-23).

Drawing attention to the notion of *lexis* is fundamental in this approach. Richards et al (1992, p.213) defines *lexis* as “the vocabulary of a language in contrast to its grammar;” thus, vocabulary and grammar are not seen as separate micro-skills as they both complement each other. In regard to this, Lewis (1997) explains that “language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text. The chunks are of different kinds and four different basic types are identified” (p. 7). Instructors must pay close attention to the linguistic principles behind this approach before preparing tasks and other materials, especially in a virtual setting.

To begin with, language instructors must call their attention to the concept of *arbitrariness of language*. That is, instructors must raise students’ awareness on the fact that certain lexical aspects may be accepted by native speakers while other items are not feasible. Examples of this are the phrases *fast food* versus *quick food*. Conventionally speaking, the former phrase is sanctioned by native speakers, but *quick food* would not share the same meaning, being this a wrong possibility. However, the phrase *quick meal* is accepted as it refers to a meal that is rapidly prepared. Lewis points out (1997, p. 19) that “the answer *You could say that, but you wouldn’t* is central to understanding *lexis*” along the way of learning collocations, expressions, and words.

There are three key concepts to pay attention to in regard to the teaching of vocabulary: *polysemy*, *homonymy*, and *synonymy*. Polysemy refers to the various meanings of a particular word form; for example, the polysemous lexeme *heart* may have multiple but related meanings as in *the heart of a response*, *a debate*, *a country*, *an aspect*, *a process*, and so on. *Homonymy*, as opposed to polysemy, occurs when a lexeme has different meanings; in this case, these do not share the same connotation. Gairns and Redman (1986, p. 14) explain that “this absence of relatedness makes homonymy less of a problem, although at a receptive level misunderstanding can still arise.” For instance, a *crane* is a type of machine used to lift and lower materials at construction sites, but this word also refers to a long-legged bird. One may notice that the pronunciation is the same. Finally, *synonymy* has to do with words that differ in meaning depending on the context or surrounding words. The lexeme *affect* used as a verb may have the connotation of having an effect on something or someone, but one may notice that the same word should not be used in these three sentences as meaning slightly varies in each context:

- a. As people are on lockdown lately, this has **affected** their psychological wellbeing.
- b. Her numerous grammatical mistakes **hindered affected** sentence clarity and content.
- c. His childhood was **shaped affected** by his relationship with his mad foster father.

## 2.1 Polywords

This study focuses on five lexical items, being *polywords* the first category to observe and analyze. In relation to *lexis*, there is a vast group of expressions or phrases that speakers—or writers—use as unchanging discourse elements. They are what Lewis (1997) called “words-with-spaces-in-them,” and it is worth noting that they “have the same status in the language as individual words” (p. 22). Consider the lexical chunking in original passage below:

Good morning! Welcome to this campus tour. At the end of the day, you will **[have a clear idea of]** what college life is about. **[Up to now]**, you have taken virtual courses, and I hope it was **[a memorable experience]**. You **[must have been]** very busy at home. **[It is time to go back to]** face-to-face classes. You are on the brink of making new friends and experiencing a world of possibilities **[on a daily basis]**. **[By the way]**, may I see your identification cards, please? It's time to start!

The boldfaced prefabricated chunks represent lexical items which are commonly recalled by speakers, but they are also used in the written mode as well. There are common words that are used to construct a large variety of expressions, collocations, or idioms. The word *matter*, for example, may appear in various lexical units or phrases such as these:

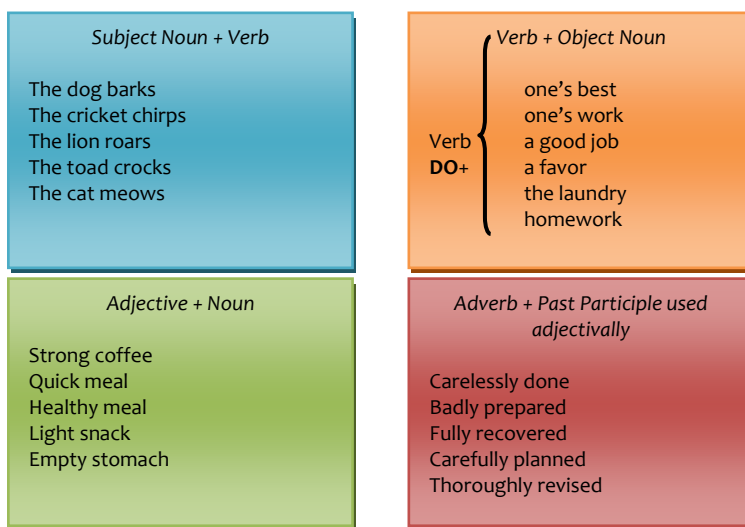
I'll have a word with him right now. It is time **to take matters into my own hands**.  
Recycling and reusing will be **a matter of life and death** in the future.  
He quit exercising again. **The fact of the matter is** he hates sports!  
**As a matter of fact**, she is the best candidate for this position.  
She underwent a surgery, and she has to rest **for that matter**.  
He was fired for being late again. It was **a matter of time!**  
**To make matters worse**, I lost my car keys once again.  
**What's the matter with you?** Are you crazy?  
Getting late to work is **no laughing matter**.

At a low-intermediate level, it is not easy for language learners to easily pinpoint these polywords or expressions. As part of the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model, teaching materials should highlight these lexical items. Teda (2014) expands on this and indicates that “the identification of chunks should be one of the central activities of language teaching. Learners need to be more aware of lexis, and helped to identify, practice and record lexis in the most efficient way” (p.22).

## 2.2 Collocations

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term *collocation* as “a word or phrase that is often used with another word or phrase, in a way that sounds correct to people who have spoken the language all their lives, but might not be expected from the meaning.” Collocations and *co-locations* (also known as word partnerships) are examples of the arbitrariness of language as learners need to identify which word combination is appropriate and which is inaccurate. Torres (2012) expands on the definition and indicates that a “collocation is the way in which words associate with one another and can be defined as word clusters, which are regularly used in spoken and written English” (p.242). At a low-intermediate level, assimilating collocations is quite challenging, especially because there are several types of combinations. Gairns and Redman (1986) list the following types: “(a) subject noun + verb, (b) verb + object noun, (c) adjective + noun, and (d) adverb + past participle used adjectivally” (p.37).

Figure 1. Basic Types of Collocations



Source: Original Work

Teaching collocations explicitly is fundamental in an integrated English course in which learners focus on all the language macro and micro skills. Hasbún (2005) points out that “knowledge of typical collocations gives learners power. Not only will they avoid making mistakes, but they will also sound more native-like because fluent and appropriate language use requires collocational knowledge” (p.3). By eliciting collocations from authentic texts and designing teacher-made vocabulary exercises, learners may enrich their knowledge and understanding of this type of lexical items. One way to achieve so is by presenting collocations by thematic categories (e.g., food, travel, money, work, and the like). In relation to this, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) explain that:

Ideally, we want L2 users to form the same word combinations (or lexical chunks) and utilize the same schemata as L1 users, but often this does not happen because of interference from the first language or because of insufficient exposure and attention to the pertinent collocations in the target language. For example, the nonnative English speaker who says or writes “bridging the hole” instead of “bridging the gap” may be understood by the interactants; however, if the interactants are native speakers of English or advanced users of English, they are likely to notice the collocation error that was made. (p.83)

One of the intricacies of teaching collocations suggests that although a language teacher may provide learners with a particular collocation (form, meaning, use and context), this does not necessarily mean that students would assimilate it satisfactorily. Michael Lewis (2000) argues that “teaching is, on the whole, organized, linear and systematic, but it is a mistake to think that learning is the same. Learning is complex and non-linear” (p.11). In other words, instead of providing only one correct combination, teachers should exemplify various options for a given collocation; by doing so, learners will have more choices in case they are not able to recall one form. For example, the same source (Lewis, 2000) mentions that the *adjective + noun* combination *heavy smoker* should be complemented with various possibilities;

“occasional, chain and non are more collocates of smoker” (p.12). This teaching practice will foster the internalization of collocations.

### 2.3 Idiomatic Phrases

Learning idioms is probably one of the most challenging aspects in vocabulary acquisition, especially when non-transparent phrases are presented in isolation. Sag et al. (2002, cited in Kay and Sag, 2014, p.4) list three types of idioms from the lexical point of view:

- a. Fixed expressions that function as single words (e.g., *all of a sudden* or *first of all*)
- b. Semi-fixed expressions that are syntactically restricted (e.g., *black and white*)
- c. Syntactically flexible expressions that must be interpreted (e.g., *spill the beans*)

Items (a) and (b) may include non-transparent phrases (e.g., *so far so good*); “these expressions need to be consciously learned just as much as idioms that are semantically opaque” (Gairns and Redman, 1986, p.36). In the case of beginners or low-intermediate learners (CEFR, A1-A2), materials must provide learners with context so that they may successfully interpret meaning from the entire phrase, instead of the individual words. Besides, idioms that are grammatically restricted represent a high level of difficulty. Apart from memorizing their meaning, learners must be aware of the fact that they cannot be altered in terms of word order, lexicon or structure; for example, to wish a classmate good luck before an exam, one says *break a leg*, not *break your legs*. One must express *make a long story short* instead of *making a long story shorter*. One way of teaching idioms properly is to group them based on the thematic sequence of materials. Thus, learners may easily acquire items related to time, technology, work, leisure activities, and so on.

To interpret meaning, language learners need to make sense of the segments of an idiomatic phrase. This has to do with the *principle of idiom*, which offers hints as to modify the lexical or syntactical structure of phrases. Sinclair (1991) explains that “a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they may appear to be analyzable into segments” (p.110). This principle has a series of characteristics:

- a. Many phrases have an indeterminate extent.
- b. Many phrases allow internal lexical variation.
- c. Many phrases allow internal lexical syntactic variation.
- d. Many phrases allow some variation in word order.
- e. Many uses of words and phrases attract other words in strong collocation.
- f. Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to co-occur with certain grammatical choices.
- g. Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment (Sinclair, 1991, p.111-112).

### 2.4 Word Forms

From the morphological and semantic level, learners must correctly distinguish between the various forms of a word so that they use the appropriate part of speech in a given context. This study focuses on derivational affixes; that is, a given affix (prefix or suffix) is added to a root word to come up with another term; the connotation of the original word does not change. Consider the series of words such as *efficient*, *efficiency*, and *efficiently* or *manage*,

management, managerial, or manager. One technique to help students visualize word forms is to make them use vocabulary charts to fill in with the correct form, as illustrated below.

**Table 1.** Box of Word Forms

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
alienation			X
	stagnate		X
		proliferating	X
	X		therapeutically
	X		constantly

Source: Original Work

## 2.5 Multi-word Verbs

Phrasal verbs belong to the category of polywords; for Lewis (2008, p. 92) “only one kind of polyword, phrasal verbs, has featured prominently in language teaching.” Many learners try to avoid the use of these polywords; for example, instead of expressing *my classmate cut in while the professor was talking*, many would prefer to say *interrupt*. This avoidance may occur because multi-word verbs or phrasal verbs are complex lexical items to acquire, especially those that are syntactically restricted and nontransparent. McCarthy and O’Dell (2007) explain that [these] “are identified by their grammar [...], but it is probable best to think of them as individual vocabulary items, to be learnt in phrases or chunks. They often—but not always—have a one-word equivalent” (p.6). Multi-word verbs must be taught in context by using authentic input. Also, Lewis (1997, p.205) suggests language teachers to “use many different ways to increase learners’ awareness of the value of noticing, recording and learning multi-word items.”

## 2.6 Pedagogical Principles behind the Lexical Approach

The following summary (Lewis, 1997) lists some of the most relevant pedagogical principles of this approach:

- a. Language teachers must get acquainted with the linguistic notion of lexis before designing exercises and other materials.
- b. “Teachers could usefully devote additional class time to dictionary-based activities, where the emphasis is on exploring lexical items of different kinds.”
- c. Teachers must focus on raising-awareness tasks so that learners assimilate the concept of arbitrariness of language.
- d. “Try to learn whole expressions containing useful words, rather than just the words, even though that seems much more difficult.”
- e. “The Lexical Approach values both the quantity and quality of input.”
- f. “[...] the [lexical] item must be taught lexically, without analysis, and secondly, teacher must, in the early stages, expect only comprehension, not production, of this language.”
- g. The concept of *noticing* is fundamental. “Accurate noticing of lexical chunks, grammatical or phonological patterns all help convert input into intake, and provide, [...] the central strategy of the Lexical Approach” (p.47-51).

## 2.7 Types of Exercises

These are just some sample exercises that low-intermediate students may benefit from although the Lexical Approach suggests a wide variety of activities and exercises:

- a. **Sentence formation:** Learners arrange the order of words and chunks to come up with a correct sentence. It is important to point out that the components of the lexical chunks should not be separated (e.g., *So far + felt + he + under the weather*).
- b. **Word forms:** Learners complete sentences by choosing the correct form of a word from a word bank (e.g., *entrepreneur, entrepreneurial, entrepreneurship*).
- c. **Matching:** Learners match syntactically flexible expressions (idioms) with the sentences that share the same context.
- d. **Identifying lexical chunks:** students read a short passage and try to divide it into lexical chunks. One possible variation of this consists of rephrasing the content of the passage so that students focus on the lexical chunks (e.g., *once upon a time* or *as far as I know*, among others).
- e. **Paragraph completion:** Students fill in the blanks with the correct lexical chunk to make the text cohesive (e.g., *To begin with, As a matter of fact, To sum up, On one hand, or on the contrary*).
- f. **Word partnerships/collocations:** students read a short passage to a classmate in order to complete a gap with a correct word collocation (e.g., The speaker has a strong... *accent*). Students should reflect on the arbitrariness of language as some forms are not *natural* or uttered by native speakers.
- g. **Collocation boxes:** Students are asked to complete a chart with topic-related words to form collocations. Lewis (2008, p.119) indicates that learners must “avoid lexicalization, and the challenge is considerable at all levels of proficiency.” The chart below illustrates this exercise:

Table 2. Collocation Boxes with the word “Meetings”

VERB	ADJECTIVE	meetings
Attend +	business +	
Arrange +	biannual +	
Postpone +	worthless +	
Call +	bilateral +	
Avoid +	interminable +	

Source: Original Work

- h. **Raising-awareness exercise:** Students are given a target word such as an adjective. Then, they list as many nouns as possible that can be used after that word (e.g., *What nouns can you use after the adjective brand-new?*).

## 2.8 Insights in the Area of Lexical Units and Mental Lexicon

Lexis has always been of interest in the field of first and second language acquisition. Biber (1998) distinguishes two major types of investigations: experimental and observational. Experimental studies involve the implementation of tests to determine the language used by subjects. On the other hand, an observational corpus-linguistic approach involves the collection of “a series of texts from different stages of acquisition or from different learners, and then analyzing the linguistic patterns in those texts” (Biber, 1998, 172). In terms of observing corpora of student language, written texts have some features:



- The researcher can incorporate as many genres of written texts as necessary (compositions, editorials, essays, outlines, and so on).
- Students may benefit from pre-writing stages and vocabulary-building tasks with the purpose of enriching their outcome (compositions, for example).
- The analysis is relatively simple as the length of the text is limited by the writing conventions of the evaluated task (eight or ten sentences maximum, for example); so, the instructor can focus on the target words/phrases easily.
- To some extent, the analysis of written texts may become time-consuming with true beginners as run-on sentences and punctuation mistakes hinder meaning and the boundaries of ideas.

Language teachers and researchers should focus on specific characteristics of lexis at the moment of analyzing corpora of student written language. *Informality* is one feature. Students, especially those at lower linguistic levels, tend to simplify their ideas. That is, instead of using complex lexicon, informal words are used. In a composition about the challenges of college life, some students may use simplified words/phrases instead of advanced ones such as *dead week*, *full-fledged college student*, *all-nighter*, *intramurals*, *marathoning* (for an exam), and so on.

Carter and Cornbleet (2001) point out that written discourse is characterized by a higher *lexical density*; noun phrases are more frequent than verb phrases and grammar forms, and “many noun phrases make use of general words rather than specific or highly technical words (‘that bit’, ‘the bottom’)” (p.63). Although students are supposed to write an academic text, vague language is used; examples of non-specific or meaningless words/phrases are: *kind of*, *sort of*, *many things*, *something like this/that*. The last feature related to lexis is known as *lexical creativity*; “every individual has his or her own [...] way of using language, favourite words and expressions and so on” (Carter and Cornbleet, 2001, p.64). Even though spoken language includes a wider variety of discourse markers and expressions, writers also have their distinctive phrases and language to express ideas in the written mode.

The previous content has to do with students’ mental lexicon. This refers to one’s store of vocabulary, its meaning, use (associations) as well as the syntactic and phonological conventions. Levelt (1995, cited in Farahian, 2011) explains the four components of mental lexicon:

[...] mental knowledge, which is the place of storage of declarative knowledge, contains four kinds of features. First, there is the specification of the item meaning. For the word *to eat* there is something like “to ingest for nourishment or for pleasure.” Second, there is a syntactic property including the category of the entry; for example, *to eat* is a verb, and the syntactic arguments it can take are the external subject and internal object. Third, there is the morphological characteristic of the item (for example, the third person for the verb ‘to go’). Fourth, there is phonological information for the entry (p.56).

Unlike using a dictionary, students may consider the context, level of formality, and discourse in order to determine the form, meaning, and use of a lexical unit. The same source (Bastkowski, 2003, cited in Farahian, 2011) indicates that in terms of second language acquisition, there is a link between the mental lexicon of L1 and L2; that is, “the idea of a ‘clean’ L2 mental lexicon is not probable since even if the second language learner [...] may not know the second language word, for example *rain*, but the concept is already in his mind (p.58).

The aforementioned concepts are related to cognitive linguistics. According to the Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards and Schmidt, 2002), cognitive linguistics also focuses on the “functional principles of language organization such as iconicity (non-arbitrary relationships between meanings and expressions) [...] and the relationship between language and thought” (p.83). Both, students’ context and prior knowledge, play a role in making connections while retrieving, storing or selecting a word for a given idea. An experiential view of cognitive linguistics “focuses on what might be going on in the minds of speakers when they produce and understand words and sentence” (Ibarretxe, 2004, p.4).

## **2.9 Corpus-based Approach and Concordancing Tools**

Nowadays, most EFL textbooks and materials take advantage of a corpus-based approach; so, they include academic words, phrases and expressions widely used in the spoken or written modes. In fact, “until the development of corpus-based methods it was impossible to discover the patterns of co-occurring features and dimensions of variation that characterize the two modes” (Biber, 1998, p.233). That is, researchers and textbook writers have a better idea of the use of word collocations in particular contexts. The same source (Biber, 1998) explains some of the practical contributions of corpus-based methods in lexicography:

- a. Grammar: examining the distribution of word classes or structures
- b. Sociolinguistics: examining the use of registers
- c. Discourse analysis: examining other types of linguistic features such as the use of discourse markers and fillers
- d. Register analysis: examining the use of language in the field of English for Specific Purposes (e.g., business English)
- e. Lexicography: examining the use of collocations (p.234-235)

Thus, lexicography and corpus-based approaches offer updated information in regard to language use in various settings. So, “the results of corpus-based studies are an important resource for textbook writers—especially when the textbooks are aimed at non-native speakers” (Biber, 1998, p.237). There are many types of corpuses. Also, this input is used in corpus-based studies for further quantitative and qualitative analyses of lexis and syntax in authentic contexts.

To analyze language, lexicographers may use concordancing tools to observe excerpts of language use in writing and/or speaking. Some examples of free concordancing tools are: aConCorde, ACTRES Corpus Manager, AntGram, Authorial Voice Analyzer, Corpus Presenter, Linguistica, MorphAdorner, among many others. These tools consist of data banks or software that will display extensive lists of authentic language to be analyzed. In this case, researchers can observe the numerous instances in which a word or phrase appears in language use. Sinclair (1991) indicates that “this is as true of grammar as of lexis, because grammar is not made of just the patterns of the common grammatical words, but relies on the whole vocabulary of the language” (p.101). Table 3 shows a sample entry, which corresponds to the uses of the phrase “sooner or later” in numerous authentic contexts. For this task, the writer chose Concordance, a free tool, that language teachers may subscribe and consult in order to create their own materials.

**Table 3.** CONCORDANCE entry of the phrase “sooner or later”

The screenshot shows the CONCORDANCE software interface. At the top, there is a search bar containing 'English Web 2020 (en1en302)'. Below the search bar, there are several search results listed. Each result includes a source name, a snippet of text, and the phrase 'sooner or later' highlighted in red. The results are numbered 1 through 15. The interface also features a sidebar on the left with various icons and a top navigation bar with a 'SUBSCRIBE' button and other controls.

Source: Entry retrieved from CONCORDANCE, <https://app.sketchengine.eu/>

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Context of the Research Study

The target population consists of thirty students who registered the first English course of the English Major at the University of Costa Rica. When this research project was implemented, students attended four virtual classes each week for such e-course. This course is *mixed*, which means students who belong to English Teaching and the English Major must take it. This course does not have any requisite. There is no placement test either, so all groups are highly heterogeneous. Based on the course textbooks, students' level is A2.

#### 3.2 Team-taught Course and Textbook

One of the challenges of first-year English courses at UCR is that they are both team-taught; this means that one instructor is in charge of covering the listening and speaking skills while the other teaches reading and writing. The rest of the micro-skills (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and culture) are covered throughout the course as well, being grammar the micro skill with a wider variety of topics. Currently, the course materials include two textbooks (Listening / Speaking and Reading / Writing) as well as the online platform and other additional resources. This virtual course was taught via Moodle.

As this small-case study focuses on the implementation of the Lexical Approach in the reading / writing component of the first half of the course, it is worth noting to synthesize the linguistic topics of the target units. The following chart covers the lexico-grammatical content of the course in which the Lexical Approach was implemented:

**Table 4.** Five Lexical Chunks Implemented in Units 2 and 3

Unit 2: TIME	Unit 3: BUILDINGS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collocations with time</li> <li>• Determiners of quantity</li> <li>• Idioms about time and routines</li> <li>• Polywords and phrases</li> <li>• Multi-word verbs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word forms (changing adjectives into nouns)</li> <li>• Word partnerships</li> <li>• Polywords and phrases</li> <li>• Multi-word verbs</li> <li>• Building and construction idioms</li> </ul>

Source: Original Work

### 3.3 Virtual Modality

Since 2020 all courses have been taught virtually. Professors have the possibility of using a virtual platform with multiple resources and tools in order to present their e-lessons and carry out evaluations. The name of this institutionalized platform is *Mediación Virtual*. Also, most professors have used videoconferencing tools (Zoom) to interact with their students and reply to their queries more rapidly.

### 3.4 Procedure

#### 3.4.1 Two Formative Tests

To begin with, students took a diagnostic test on the first day of the course. This test was designed by the researcher. The course does not include any standardized diagnostic test. This type of formative instrument was aimed at assessing twenty-five lexical units, which belonged to the target lexical groups or categories. Then, at the end of the first Reading and Writing chapters (first half of the semester), they took a second test to observe how much they have learned throughout explicit instruction. These two tests were non-evaluated and had no impact on the final grade.

#### 3.4.2 The Lexical Approach and Writing Instruction

By following the principles of the Lexical Approach, the instructor taught lexical groups in the context of two thematic units of the Reading and Writing textbook. Two units were selected (*Time* and *Buildings*) and a series of fifty lexical chunks were presented explicitly for each unit, being divided into five lexical groups in context. In relation to writing, the instructor carried out the various stages of the writing process: pre, while, and post writing. It was during this process that students completed online exercises to assimilate the lexical units to be incorporated in their future compositions.

Then, the writing stage consisted of two parts: the draft paragraph and the final version of this academic composition. In short, students had to write a draft outline and a draft composition based on a topic of the course unit. They do so in one hour. After receiving feedback, they had to write its final version in the same amount of time, approximately two weeks later. Thus, for this project, the instructor revised 120 texts (60 draft compositions and 60 final versions), identified, and counted all the lexical units seen in the first part of the course for their further analysis.

#### 3.4.3 Types of Assessment Instruments

To sum up, this small-case study is based on the following assessment instruments:

- Instrument 1: One diagnostic test
- Evaluated written output 1: First academic composition
- Evaluated written output 2: Second academic composition
- Instrument 2: One diagnostic test

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Results of Pre and Post Tests

The pre and post formative tests assessed the use of five lexical groups in two different types of exercises: multiple choice and cloze exercise (drag and drop task). To easily compare the results of both instruments, the same items were evaluated by changing the contexts and format (i.e., from sentences to short conversations or short passages). Interestingly, there was a total increase of 153 points in the number of *correct answers*. Furthermore, the results show a decrease of 193 points in the total number of *incorrect answers*, being positive results in this part of the research. Table 5 lists the target lexical chunks and summarizes the results obtained in both tests in terms of correct and incorrect individualized items.

Table 5. Results of Pre and Post Tests

LEXICAL ITEMS	PRETEST		POSTTEST	
	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong
<b>Collocations</b>				
1. stealing time	22	7	6	21
2. waste of time	24	5	26	1
3. quick look	24	5	23	4
4. attend a meeting	17	12	20	7
5. fail the course	16	13	25	2
<b>Multi-word verbs</b>				
6. slipped away	20	9	26	1
7. getting on	2	27	9	18
8. break up	7	22	22	5
9. bursting with	12	17	25	2
10. cross off	20	9	19	8
<b>Polywords</b>				
11. until the last minute	25	4	27	0
12. on one hand	9	20	20	7
13. as a matter of fact	16	13	10	17
14. to the extent that	10	19	14	13
15. give it a second thought	25	4	24	3
<b>Idioms</b>				
16. once in a blue moon	19	10	20	7
17. turn back time	25	4	26	1
18. a bridge too far	12	7	25	2
19. (get) in on the ground floor	10	19	27	0
20. a whale of a time	3	26	27	0
<b>Word forms</b>				
21. managerial	1	28	16	11
22. entrepreneurial	7	22	23	4

23. unmanageable	25	4	25	2
24. succeed	12	17	21	6
25. employability	12	17	22	5
<b>Overall Results</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>147</b>

Source: Original work

It is worth noting that students only had forty minutes to carry out these tests; also, they had to pay close attention to the context clues of each item to fully convey meaning and select the correct answer. Regarding the pre test, 29 students completed the instrument and 1 student decided not to take it as this was not going to affect his final grade. In general, students expressed they were motivated in taking the first instrument so as to monitor their knowledge obtained in high school. In fact, this population—especially first-year students—took the last year of secondary school under virtual modalities or distance learning. This important factor may explain why the results show a low average of 4.98, being 7.0 the passing grade at the University of Costa Rica. Many students were worried about their own performance because they did not expect such low grade.

As mentioned earlier, although the pre and post test assessed the same lexical units, there was a lapse of eight weeks between them. Also, the instructor hid the icon of this first exam in the virtual setting as soon as students were given a couple of days to see the grade and the general feedback. They could not know that the same lexical units were going to be evaluated later. Table 6 shows the results obtained by every student and the difference between each test in terms of points.

Table 6. Comparison of Results in Both Tests

Student	PRETEST	POSTTEST	Difference
1	3.60	7.42	+3.82
2	4.40	9.35	+4.95
3	7.20	8.71	+1.51
4	4.80	--	N/A
5	4.00	5.48	+1.48
6	1.20	5.16	+3.96
7	2.00	5.48	+3.48
8	7.60	9.03	+1.43
9	2.80	8.39	+5.59
10	6.40	--	N/A
11	6.00	8.71	+2.71
12	4.80	9.03	+4.23
13	6.00	8.06	+2.06
14	3.60	7.42	+3.82
15	5.20	6.13	+0.93
16	6.00	9.35	+3.35
17	4.00	7.10	+3.1
18	1.60	5.81	+4.21
19	3.20	6.45	+3.25
20	7.60	8.06	+0.46
21	6.40	9.03	+2.63
22	4.00	8.06	+4.06
23	2.40	7.10	+4.7
24	--	--	N/A
25	8.00	7.10	-0.9
26	7.60	8.71	+1.11

27	5.60	7.10	+1.5
28	6.80	8.71	+1.91
29	5.60	8.39	+2.79
30	6.00	9.03	+3.03
AVERAGE	4.98 (29)	7.72 (27)	

Source: Original work

In this case, only 5 learners passed the pre test (second column). The total average is 4.98, which is significantly low if this were a regular, evaluated quiz. After explicit instruction and practice on lexical units, students took the post test, and in this case, only 6 students failed it and 21 passed it (third column). The last column shows some interesting findings. This column summarizes the difference in increase or decrease of points between both tests for each student. So, 26 students showed an increase in the grade of the post test. This took place even with the 6 students who failed this exam. It is important to mention that 3 students were excluded from this analysis as they did not take one or both tests. Only 1 student has a decrease of -0.9 as he or she got a lower grade in the post test. All these results showed that explicit instruction of lexical units had a positive effect on the assimilation and recognition of the target lexical units.

#### 4.1 Lexical Units and Students' Final Compositions

As mentioned earlier, in this Integrated English course, students are expected to write four compositions after receiving explicit instruction of writing conventions, syntactic errors, punctuation, capitalization, grammar structures, and the thematic content of the target units. For the purpose of this research study, students received explicit instruction of lexical units based on the content of two units whose themes are Time and Buildings. So, they were given lists of contextualized lexical units throughout the first part of the semester. Then, they are asked to write one draft or non-evaluated academic composition. After receiving feedback from the instructor, they wrote the final version.

In both cases, they were given a list of specific guidelines, and the instructor stated that they must incorporate some items from the five lexical groups in their compositions. For each set of lexical units, for example collocations, the instructor counted all the lexical units from the final version of both compositions. The objective is to observe the effect of explicit teaching of lexical units in the writing outcome. Thus, table 7 shows the complete results of such task.

The first column indicates the numbers of all students, and this number correlates with the two previous tables. For each final composition, the instructor counted the target lexical groups: collocations (C), multi-word verbs (M), polywords (P), idioms (I), and word forms (W). Next to this list of lexical units, the next column shows the total number of target lexical units used by this student on his or her writing outcome. Again, it is important to emphasize that the instructor took into account only the five lists of lexical units studied in class; for this reason, it seems to be that students are using few lexical units in general. In total, 449 lexical units were counted after revising the first draft and final version of the first composition, whose main topic was Time.

The level of occurrence according to the total number of lexical units are: word forms (144), polywords (79), collocations (44), multi-word verbs (44), and idioms (8). One possible reason for this has to do with the large number of word forms listed at the end of each unit of the textbook. Similarly, the writing lesson includes a wide variety of polywords as sequencers to establish cohesion and coherence. There was an emphasis in the explicit teaching of multi-

word verbs as this is a challenging topic; also, avoidance tends to occur with phrasal verbs, especially in writing. Idiomatic expressions are harder to assimilate as other lexical chunks. In this case, there were only 8 idiomatic expressions used in this composition.

In the second composition, whose topic was Buildings and Architecture, there was an evident increase in the number of lexical units. In this case, the numbers of lexical units are: word forms (130), polywords (97), collocations (109), multi-word verbs (67), and idioms (21). The last column of this table shows the difference between the number of lexical chunks between the two final versions. As these compositions were graded, all 30 students carried out these tasks. Only 6 students incorporated fewer lexical units in the second composition, and 2 students had the same number of lexical chunks in both outcomes. In general, students incorporated more units correctly in the second writing text, which is a positive result of explicit instruction.

**Table 7.** Number of Lexical Units Used in Compositions 1 and 2

Learner	First Final Composition					Total	Second Final Composition					Total	Difference
	C	M	P	I	W		C	M	P	I	W		
1	4	0	2	0	4	10	5	2	4	1	4	16	+5
2	4	1	5	0	7	17	4	2	6	1	7	20	+3
3	4	1	2	0	6	13	6	2	4	0	6	18	+5
4	4	1	2	0	7	14	3	1	5	1	9	19	+5
5	2	1	1	0	5	9	2	1	2	0	3	8	-1
6	1	2	1	0	5	9	3	2	2	0	6	13	+4
7	2	1	3	0	9	15	3	2	3	0	5	13	-2
8	5	1	5	1	9	21	6	3	5	1	8	23	+2
9	2	2	4	0	4	12	3	2	5	0	3	13	+1
10	2	0	3	0	6	11	3	1	4	1	3	12	+1
11	4	1	5	0	5	15	4	2	4	0	6	16	+1
12	2	1	2	0	3	8	3	2	3	1	5	14	+6
13	4	2	3	1	9	19	3	2	4	1	3	13	-5
14	4	2	4	0	5	15	5	3	5	0	6	19	+4
15	2	2	3	1	4	12	3	3	4	0	5	15	+3
16	3	2	4	1	5	15	4	3	4	1	6	18	+3
17	2	1	2	0	4	8	4	4	3	1	5	18	+10
18	1	1	1	0	3	6	2	1	2	0	3	8	+2
19	2	1	1	0	2	6	3	2	1	1	4	11	+5
20	3	0	1	0	3	7	4	1	2	0	2	9	+2
21	2	2	2	0	5	11	3	2	2	1	3	11	0
22	2	1	1	0	1	5	3	2	3	1	2	11	+6
23	1	1	1	0	0	3	3	2	3	1	1	10	+7
24	5	2	3	1	6	17	3	2	2	1	4	12	-5
25	4	2	3	1	6	16	4	3	2	1	3	13	-3
26	3	2	5	1	5	16	4	3	2	0	2	11	-5
27	4	3	3	0	4	14	3	3	4	1	3	14	0
28	4	4	3	0	5	16	5	3	3	1	6	18	+2
29	3	2	2	0	4	11	4	3	2	2	4	15	+4
30	5	2	2	1	3	13	4	3	2	2	3	14	+1



	44	44	79	8	144		109	67	97	21	130		
Abbreviations: Collocations (C) / Multi-Word Verbs (M) / Polywords (P) / Idioms (I) / Word Forms (W)													

**Source:** Original work

## 5. Teaching Implications of the Findings

The primary teaching implication relies on the fact that lexis-based exercises and activities had a positive effect on the use of productive vocabulary among the thirty students of such course. Learners could incorporate lexical units in academic writing, being this a challenging task as the register, formality and writing conventions are hard to achieve in this first-year course. It is also worth noting that this is a heterogeneous population. Through explicit instruction on the five categories of lexical units (collocations, multi-word verbs, polywords, idiomatic phrases, and word forms), students also increase their vocabulary, which was also used in additional activities (oral exams and oral presentations). As a consciousness-raising strategy, students became aware of the notion of lexical chunks in terms of their meaning and use.

Thus, based on the results of the findings, students will be able to:

- a. Avoid cognates or transparent words in academic writing as they do not represent a major challenge.
- b. Develop a product-based approach as lexical units are taught and reinforced in various lessons.
- c. Learn that writing is characterized by high lexical density and complex noun phrases.
- d. Contextualize topic-related words based on the categories of each chapter.
- e. Increase the use of academic words (AWL).
- f. Identify lexical chunks in written and aural texts (lectures, conversations, and podcasts).
- g. Become acquainted with the use of idiomatic phrases and colloquial expressions.
- h. Learn that ideas (phrases) should be comprehended in the correct context.
- i. Pay attention to idiomaticity; that is, the chunks that occur in the spoken and written modes.

## 6. Sample Lesson on Lexical Units: Materials Development

Implementing the Lexical Approach in an integrated e-course requires proper planning and training on the format, content and instructions of each task. The level of difficulty increases when a virtual setting is used to teach such course. The instructor has to carefully select the online tools and resources to publish and embed content. To motivate students, appealing and challenging tasks must be prepared to lead the writing process and collect good sample compositions, in this case 120 paragraphs. The following sample e-lesson illustrates the digital tools and resources used to teach one of the lessons on writing by using the lexical approach. Also, the writer will illustrate some types of exercises with sample tasks implemented in such course. This sample lesson covers the thematic unit entitled *Time*.

### 6.1 Activation of Students' Prior Knowledge

This sample lesson consists of the various components of the writing process: activation of prior knowledge as well as the pre, while, and post-writing stages. Thus, to activate students' prior knowledge, the virtual lesson included an activity prepared with *Jigsawpuzzle*, an online resource to create puzzle based on images previously edited. As the topics of the unit are

Time, Procrastination and College Students, and Time Management, the image contained an info graphic about the circadian rhythm.

## 6.2 Pre-writing Stage

By using a flipbook, students could get acquainted with the definition of lexical units and their relation with vocabulary acquisition and writing. To make this more challenging and contextualized, a conversation regarding college life was used to present 21 lexical chunks distributed in the five groups aforementioned: idioms, polywords, multi-word verbs, collocations, and word forms. This presentation, which was prepared with **Flipsnack**, also contained key definitions, further explanations, and examples in context. After this, and based on the pedagogical principles of the Lexical Approach, students carried out a series of five tasks by using **LearningApps**, a digital platform to create various interactive grammatical exercises. In general terms, some of these exercises embedded on the virtual lesson were:

**a. Dialogue completion:** students read a contextualized conversation; then, they need to click, drag, and drop the correct polyword to complete the missing part. A few distracters were also added to increase the level of difficulty. This is a sample exercise with multi-word verbs in context:

**Multi-word verbs.** Complete the following mini-conversations with the correct multi-word verb. Then, click, drag and drop the phrase that best completes each dialogue. There are three extra phrases that you will not need.

1. A: I can't believe classes at UCR have started! We're college students now!  
B: You are right! These last months seemed to have [**slipped away**].
2. A: We have so many assignments in our Humanities course.  
B: Exactly, and the worst thing is that time is [**getting on**] a bit now. We need to talk about all the information we have to read and study.
3. A: Where do you live? And how do you like your hometown?  
B: My family is originally from Cartago. This place is [**steeped in**] historical sites, which should be restored and transformed into museums or art galleries.
4. A: The Empire State is visited by countless tourists every day. Have you ever visited it?  
B: Well, I visited it five years about, and it was [**bursting with**] tourists from all over the world.
5. A: What can college students do to manage their time more efficiently?  
B: I think it is crucial to keep "to-do-lists" with all the assignments and duties so that as soon as you carry them out, you may [**cross off**] tasks as you do them.

**b. Group assignment:** one of the fundamentals of the Lexical Approach is for learners to identify lexical chunks. Thus, by using the same online tool, they read a passage that includes a series of highlighted phrases. The digital platform displays the titles of the five lexical groups seen in this lesson. Then, students are given a series of phrases to be dragged and dropped on the correct box (idiom, collocation, multi-word verb, and so on).

**c. Sequencing:** by using **LearningApps**, students read a paragraph, which has a similar format to the one they are expected to produce, with some blank spaces or gaps. To assess the use of polywords (in this case sequencers or sequence chunks), they need to click and drag each lexical chunk and then drop it to fill the gap according to the context or surrounding sentences. This is a sample exercise to practice polywords in context:

**Polywords.** Read the passage below. Then, drag and drop the correct polyword to make the text cohesive. There are five extra polywords you will not need.

Many college students tend to procrastinate, and this is a bad habit. When students procrastinate, they delay and delay tasks and duties [**until the last minute**]. In the English major, for example, many students start writing their essays one day before the paper is due. This has important consequences. [**On one hand**], they will not have enough time to revise and edit the paper. Besides, some people may end up committing plagiarism because they feel they will not meet the deadline. [**As a matter of fact**], this is a very important problem in many colleges; the consequences are very serious [**to the extent that**] students may be suspended or even expelled from the academic program. So, in relation to procrastination, college students should [**give it a second thought**] and plan their tasks on time so that their academic record will not be affected.

**d. Matching sentence heads:** students use an embedded exercise in which they need to match the first part of a sentence with the second half. All these sentences contain the idioms seen in the lesson. One sample sentence may be: *As Kenneth **feels blue** today, he decided not to participate and stayed silent.* Students also reflect on the use of punctuation marks.

**f. Collocations:** learners select the correct collocation from a word bank. They click, drag, and drop the correct lexical unit to fit in the context of the sentence. The following is a sample exercise:

**Collocations.** Read the context of each sentence. Choose the best option in order to complete the idea.

1. The angry opponent soccer player said to the referee that the other players were [**stealing time**].
2. For many office employees, attending worthless and never-ending meetings is just a [**waste of time**].
3. Please, take a [**quick look**] at these books and see if they are useful for your research.
4. All first-year students must [**attend a meeting**] to get familiar with college life at UCR.
5. At UCR, if a student gets a grade below 7, he or she [**fails the course**] and must register it next semester.

**g. Identifying word forms:** by creating a crossword puzzle, students are given a sentence with a missing noun. Students have to solve the puzzle by finding out the correct term. A sample sentence for such game is: *At his new workplace, Maria is one of the most efficient (employ) \_\_\_\_\_.* In this case, students need to discover that the correct word form is employee.

**Word forms.** Choose the correct word form that best completes each sentence.

1. Kenneth was promoted at the workplace. He has a [**managerial**] position at the moment.
2. One of the preliminary steps of the [**entrepreneurial**] process is to identify the opportunity to create a product that meets the needs of target consumers.
3. For some students, both studying and working full time is just [**unmanageable**]. They are unable to do so.
4. Keep on working hard and you will [**succeed**] and graduate.
5. [**Employability**] is perhaps one of the target goals of the higher education process.

**h. Identifying idioms:** with a multiple-choice or cloze exercise, students choose the correct idiom to complete the idea. Enough context must be given,

**Idioms.** Choose the best idiomatic phrase that completes each sentence.

1. Since most publications are easily found online, I borrow books from the library [**once in a blue moon**].
2. I wish I could [**turn back time**] and learn foreign languages and computing at an early age. Now, I am too busy to do so.
3. For many first-year students, taking six courses would be [**a bridge too far**]. That is time-consuming and exhausting, especially during exams period.
4. My father [**got in on the ground floor**] because he is an entrepreneur. He makes dog houses and sells them all over the country.
5. My family and I had a [**whale of a time**] on the trip to France. It was just amazing!

**i. Probable expressions with slots:** This exercise is more challenging. In this case they are given a sentence with a blank space. Students focus on the multi-word verb. Then, they choose the correct particles that make the sentence possible (for example: My colleagues have to think **ABOUT-AWAY-OF** it before the next meeting). Which word in each group has an incorrect possibility from the other two options?

**j. Classifying lexical chunks:** Students are given a sample conversation about Time Management. There are 15 boldfaced lexical units and the exercise consists of classifying them in terms of collocations, polywords, multi-word verbs, word forms, and idioms.

The second part of this stage has to do with sentence errors, being one of the components of the course. Students read a presentation prepared with **Emaze** in which they learn about the definitions of sentence errors: fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences. After this, they watch a video on sentence errors displayed in a digital tool called **Edpuzzle**; this allows teachers to insert questions, comments, or information during specific sections of the video clip. This is an interactive, motivating activity.

### 6.3 While-writing Stage

Before writing their compositions, students were given a list of lexical units that contain all the key lexical chunks of the unit about Time. Students have one hour to write an academic paragraph in which they incorporate as many lexical units as possible. To submit the composition, they use the **Moodle** platform.

### 6.4 Post-writing Stage

Students receive general and individual feedback on their writing. Also, they are all asked to edit the text and send the revised version. By using **Quizlet**, they answer some questions regarding error correction. This is part of formative assessment.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the teaching of EFL or ESL courses, implementing the Lexical Approach enriches the acquisition of important language aspects. In the context of this research study, working with integrated English courses increases the level of difficulty as all language skills and sub-skills are combined in such team-taught course. The instructor must study the pedagogical

principles behind this methodology before designing activities and exercises. Also, in virtual contexts, the selection of Web 2.0 tools must be carefully planned.

These are some recommendations to consider:

- a. Students should know that they need to pay close attention to the lexical units explicitly taught.
- b. Similarly, they need to learn that there are various categories of lexical chunks.
- c. In virtual courses, instructors must decide on special digital tools in which grammar or vocabulary exercises may be prepared or embedded.
- d. For students to recognize lexical units, appropriate context must be given.
- e. Presenting lexical units in relation to thematic components of a textbook facilitates the presentation and recognition of form and meaning.

Finally, as Lewis pointed out (1997), “correctly identifying chunks is the fundamental skill which aids both formal learning and acquisition” (p.89). More importantly, combining this method with virtual courses certainly varies the teaching process and students learn new content in a more motivating, challenging, and interesting form.

## 8. Research Limitations

While gathering data for this small-scale study, the writer encountered a few drawbacks. Absenteeism has always been a recurrent problem in first-year courses, especially with virtual lessons via Zoom. Also, a few students submitted texts with a wrong rhetorical pattern such as argumentative letters or process description. So, a second version of the text was assigned. Some students tended to simplify their writings; repetition of topic-related words was another factor. Finally, several students experienced technical problems related to equipment and connectivity.

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