

how to ... develop lexis at higher levels

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Aspects of lexis
 - modifying, extending, and commenting
 - teaching chunks
 - link words and phrases
 - awareness of style
- 3 Using spoken and written text
- 4 Anticipating useful lexis
- 5 Self-study

1 Introduction

Beginners need vocabulary, intermediate learners need vocabulary, advanced learners need vocabulary. In fact, whatever level a learner is at, vocabulary expansion is viewed as a high priority, and is often essential for progress to a higher level. But while the need for lexis remains constant, the type of lexis required may change. In order to survive and communicate basic messages, most low level learners need quite a lot of nouns, a range of common verbs, and a small stock of *fixed*¹ and *semi-fixed expressions*² which they can produce automatically, e.g.

*How are you? I think so. What does that mean?
Never mind. Let's go. No, that's all.*

Learning common collocations (*a bad cold, black coffee, go to university, get a job*) is also essential right from beginner level.

Want to know more about collocation and lexical phrases? Go to intermediate **teacher's book, how to ... activate vocabulary p.136.**

Once learners are able to meet their basic needs with ease and a reasonable degree of accuracy, they can start to concern themselves more with other areas of vocabulary.

2 Aspects of lexis


By upper-intermediate level, learners should aim for more subtle nuances of meaning, they should be linking their thoughts together more clearly and cohesively, using the appropriate style when they speak or write, and, it goes with out saying, building up a more comprehensive bank of collocations and expressions. Let's consider these in more detail.

modifying, extending, and commenting

As learners progress, one important way in which they develop is attaining greater fluency, and this in turn gives them the capacity to express themselves in more complex ways, and at greater length. One way you can assist them is to introduce lexis which builds on what they know and will enable them to (1) modify, (2) extend, and (3) comment on what they are saying.

*fixed expressions*¹ go to **glossary** for numbered items p.166

- 1 The example below takes expressions that intermediate learners already know and use (*I'm (not) sure, I don't really know*), but slots in **modifiers** common in spoken English (*pretty* and *too*), as well as adding extensions (*to be honest*), and offering alternatives (*I haven't a clue*), so that learners can express the same ideas more precisely, with a wider range of language – and sound more natural.


**natural English**
saying how sure you are 2.4

I'm (pretty) sure (about that).
I don't really know, to be honest.
I'm not (too) sure (about that).
I haven't a clue. ☹

Listen and write the questions you hear.
Practise the questions and answers with a

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit two p.28

- 2 This second example below takes learners beyond the ubiquitous *I agree / I don't agree*, and provides them with varied and natural ways of both agreeing with and challenging other people's opinions; in other words, it extends their range of expression.

**natural English**
agreeing with and challenging opinions

'I think we should have more men than women on the island.'

agreeing	challenging
Yes, that makes sense.	Why do you say that?
that seems sensible.	I can't see the point of that.
I think you're right.	I don't see why.

Practise saying the phrases to yourself.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit three p.38

- 3 The final example on p.161 introduces phrases that learners can use to **comment** on and express their attitude to the information they are communicating.



natural English expectation and surprise

Use these words and phrases for something that was expected to happen:

She passed her test, **as you might expect**.
He kept going and **inevitably** /ɪn'evɪtəbli/ he ran out of petrol.

Use these phrases for something that was not expected:

He ran across the road and, **to my surprise / amazement**, he threw flowers at me.
It was almost dark but, **for some reason**, he didn't have his lights on.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit five p.60.

In our experience, learners find this quite challenging even at upper-intermediate level. This **natural English** box forms part of an activity where learners have to describe a driving incident around a given framework, and have the opportunity to incorporate one or two expressions of expectation or surprise. The previous two **natural English** boxes also have associated practice activities.

think!¹

Think of suitable language for upper-intermediate learners to extend or modify these sentences. The ... indicates where you can put the additional language.

- 1 (angrily) Where ... have you been?
- 2 (interrupting) ... Can I speak to you?
- 3 (accusing sb) That was ... stupid
- 4 It was ... a ... relief to get back home.

In these sentences, replace the underlined phrases with suitable alternatives for upper-intermediate level.

- 5 Can I speak to you?
- 6 If I were you, I'd take the job.
- 7 People came from every country.
- 8 Can you watch my bags for one minute?

go to **answer key** p.166

teaching chunks

Almost all the examples so far in this chapter show vocabulary being taught not through individual words, but as part of fixed expressions, e.g. *to be honest* or semi-fixed expressions, e.g. *to my surprise / amazement*. Presenting phrases will be an important part of vocabulary teaching at any level. At higher levels though, learners can obviously cope with longer chunks of language, and they can explore new meanings and patterns of familiar language. For example, upper-intermediate learners will all know the verb *tell*, but how many know and use it with the meaning *recognize*, in the patterns given in the **natural English** box opposite?

- 6 Look at the phrases in the **natural English** box and complete the first example with a phrase from the text.



natural English expressions with *tell* (*recognize*)

_____ a silk scarf and an acrylic one.

I can't tell one type of beer **from** another.

Can you tell what someone's nationality is, just by looking at them?

Can you tell the difference between one type of mineral water and another?

In A/B pairs, ask / say something about:

- A – decaffeinated coffee and ordinary coffee
– someone lying or telling the truth
– different brands of fruit juice
– a crocodile and an alligator

- B – different brands of pasta
– someone's job and their appearance
– real leather and fake leather
– good wine and cheap wine

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit ten p.116.

One potential difficulty with teaching 'chunks', for both teachers and learners, is that many consist of words that, individually, are all familiar to learners at this level, e.g.

the other day
for some reason
I'd find it hard to do that
it's up to you
I didn't mean to
have a go

From a learning point of view, this should make such phrases relatively easy to master (there are no new forms to remember), but the danger is that learners will not recognize them as 'new' vocabulary, or indeed, as vocabulary at all. This is a particular problem with written text: the vocabulary items that learners usually focus on are the individual words they don't recognize, and some of these will probably be low frequency items of little long term value. You may find, therefore, that you will have to take much of the responsibility for highlighting useful phrases and lexical patterns, i.e. pointing them out in a text, checking that learners understand them, writing them on the board, asking learners to repeat them and use them in other contexts. If you are working with a monolingual group, it may be enlightening to show your learners that they would be unlikely to put together many of these phrases accurately by translating from their first language. In other words, these are phrases that need to be learned as lexical items, just as learners recognize they need to learn *collar*, *collapse*, or *conceited*.

think!²

Read the joke. Underline three individual words and three lexical chunks which upper-intermediate learners may not know and may find generally useful.

Two moose hunters from Texas are flown to a lake in Alaska in the middle of nowhere. They manage to kill a large moose each. When the plane returns to pick them up, the pilot looks at them and says, 'This little plane won't lift all of us, the equipment and both those animals. You'll have to leave one behind. We'll never make it over the trees to take off.' 'That's baloney,' says one of the hunters.

'Yeah, you're just a coward. Last year we came out and killed two moose, and the pilot wasn't afraid to take off!'

The pilot gets angry and says, 'Right! If he did it, then I can do it. I can fly as well as anyone!'

They load up and start to take off. The plane almost makes it, but doesn't manage to clear the trees at the end of the lake. It turns upside down, scattering the baggage, moose and passengers all over the place.

Still alive, the pilot looks up and says, 'Where are we?'

One of the hunters puts his head up, looks around and says, 'I'd say ... about 100 metres further than last year!'

go to **answer key** p.166

link words and phrases

At intermediate level and below, learners produce quite short utterances which don't usually require a wide range of linking devices. Even when link words are required, learners rarely have the knowledge or processing capacity to work out how to use them in real time. This becomes an issue at a higher level when learner output is longer and more complex. Effective linking not only adds sophistication, it also helps learners to sound more natural and encourages the production of longer, more coherent chunks of language.

Traditionally, clause combination has often been left until this level, with the result that teachers may spend considerable amounts of time teaching adverbs of concession, e.g. *however*, *in spite of*, or addition, e.g. *moreover*, *furthermore*, and so on.

Want to know more? Go to **Practical English Usage** by Michael Swan pp.151 to 158.

If there has been a weakness here, it has been the concentration on *discourse markers*³ which characterize written English, with far less attention paid to those used predominantly in spoken English. Both are likely to be important at this level, and if learners can recognize a wide range of linking devices from spoken and written English, this will help them to anticipate what is going to come up in the next part of the *discourse*⁴. In other words, there is a significant receptive pay-off for learners, in addition to their obvious value to learners as part of their productive vocabulary. Here is one exercise for you to do, which you could also use or adapt for your own learners.

think!³

How do you think these sentences might continue? What do the link words in bold suggest?

- 1 We left the door key under the plant **just in case** _____.
- 2 The lights were all blazing away **even though** _____.
- 3 I don't like his current girlfriend much. **Mind you,** _____.
- 4 I'm not going to the wedding – it's too far away. **Besides,** _____.
- 5 I asked my teenage son to tidy his room last night and **predictably,** _____.
- 6 I've lent him money twice before – **the trouble is,** _____.

go to **answer key** p.166

There are also sequences of linkers which are used when structuring speech or writing, and these can often be applied quite generatively. A simple example is this sequence:

First of all (I couldn't find the car keys) ...

then to make matters worse (there were road works all the way)

but worst of all, (by the time I got there the party was over).

Such frameworks can be used by learners to connect ideas together and speak at greater length. Here is an example from the **natural English** box on p.87.



natural English linking reasons together

There are several reasons why I'd like the job / I'd be good at the job.

First of all, I've had experience in dealing with the public.

Secondly, I'm very patient.

And another thing is that I'm very fond of travelling.

- 2 Compare your ideas with your partner.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit seven p.87.

awareness of style

As learners become more proficient, an awareness of different levels of formality takes on greater significance. Even if most of a learner's language is reasonably fluent and accurate, errors of style can create misunderstandings without the learner being aware of it. Moreover, listeners do not always make allowances for errors of style and assume that someone with a good level of English 'should know better'. We once witnessed a proficient, (and polite) young male tourist receive a very frosty look from an older, female bank cashier after the following exchange took place when the tourist was changing money.

cashier: *How would you like the cash?* (five-pound notes, etc.)

tourist: *I don't mind, love.*

The tourist had probably heard this term of endearment from other shop assistants (it is quite common in British English), and assumed that by using it himself he might sound similarly warm and friendly; sadly not the case.

spoken and written English

One important stylistic contrast in British English is between the various forms of the written and spoken language. If you are using a written text in class, you can point out to learners how similar ideas might be expressed in spoken English. This not only helps to develop their awareness of different styles, but also provides an opportunity to teach useful vocabulary, as in this example, where the learners have already encountered the formal verbs in a written text.



natural English spoken v. written English

We tend to use phrasal verbs and idioms more in spoken English. In written English, there's often a more formal equivalent.

more formal

Your telephone has been **disconnected**.

They **abolished** the old system.

The boy was **reprimanded** by the teacher.

more informal

Our phone's been _____.

They _____ the old system.

Joe was _____ by the teacher.

Fill the gaps with these phrasal verbs.

got rid of

told off

cut off

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit five p.63.

You can also ask learners to 'translate' some of the more formal parts of a text to make it more informal. Notices and warnings are a useful context here. You could ask learners how someone would express the ideas in informal spoken English.

example

smoking prohibited = You can't smoke here.

- 1 no vacancies (= The hotel is full.)
- 2 please tender exact fare and state destination (= Please give the exact money (to the driver) and say where you are going.)
- 3 no exit (= You can't get out here.)
- 4 cyclists dismount here (= You have to get off your bike here.)
- 5 do not exceed the stated dose (= You mustn't take more medicine than it says on the packet.)

It is useful to point out to learners the information on style in dictionaries, as this will enable them to check new items for style and note it down as they learn them. You can give your class a set of lexical items covering a range of styles, e.g. formal, informal, neutral. Here is an example:

- 1 Put the words and phrases under the correct heading, according to style. Use a dictionary to check your answers.

inherit (money)	bequeath sth to sb	be rolling (in money)
be hard up	remuneration	be well-off
purchase	pricey	invest
more formal	neutral	more informal

go to **answer key** p.166

3 Using spoken and written text

For many teachers, the most obvious source of new lexis is text. This is particularly true at higher levels when learners can handle longer authentic texts, and these often provide a rich source of input. This new lexis has the virtue of being contextualized, and there should be a high degree of motivation on the learners' part to understand lexis that forms part of an interesting text (less so perhaps if the text is dull).

learner choice

In addition to any lexis you choose to highlight for your learners, it is a good idea to give them some time to explore the text for themselves. Learners have different needs and interests, and by this level will also have different vocabularies; words and phrases familiar to some learners will be new to others. Restrict learners to checking a limited number of items in class, e.g. two to four, and set a time limit in order to focus their attention. Move round the class giving assistance where necessary.

using tapescripts

Texts are often assumed to be written. However, you should be spending just as much time – in some cases more – on spoken text, otherwise your learners will be getting a very unbalanced lexical diet. Understanding new lexis while you listen is neither practical nor indeed possible in many instances, but after exploiting a spoken text for the development of different listening skills, you can make very good use of the tapescript. We have done this extensively in **natural English**, as some lexical features are more common in spoken English. Here is an example of working from a tapescript, after the learners have listened to the passage several times and completed comprehension tasks.

- a Circle all the examples of *so*, *anyway*, and *so anyway*. Why are they used? Check with the **natural English** box on p.59 of the student's book.
- b Find phrases in the tapescript which mean:
 - 1 he spent the night
 - 2 he couldn't get the car to go
 - 3 to his surprise
 - 4 I imagine he was very angry
 - 5 he had no alternative
 - 6 as you can imagine

from upper-intermediate **listening booklet** p.19.

text search activities

There are many different kinds of text search activity that you can do with written and spoken texts to help learners with lexis. Here are a few examples:

- Find a word / phrase in the text which means the same as ... (*Wait a minute!* / *What's the matter?* / *It's easy to find*)
- Circle all the words and phrases in the text which relate to ... (*money* / *friendship* / *sleep*, etc.)
- Complete these common phrases, then compare with the phrases in the tapescript.
(*I'd had a very late _____; I _____ asleep straightaway; I slept like a _____; I forgot to set the _____*)
- Circle all the examples of *anyway* / *so anyway*, i.e. a spoken or written connector in the text. What do they mean, and when are they used?

- Transform these sentences. The meaning must stay the same. Then check in the text to find the transformations, e.g.
It will have a big effect on people's lives.
It will make _____.
 (a big difference to people's lives)
We'll give you the information you need.
We'll tell you _____.
 (whatever you need to know)
- Find examples of ... e.g. phrases which show that someone is listening with interest; phrases which show that the listener is surprised / doesn't believe the speaker, etc.

4 Anticipating new lexis

Texts are not the only vehicle for a focus on lexis; an alternative approach is to plan speaking activities for the lesson which you think will be of interest to your learners, then anticipate some of the vocabulary that you think will be relevant and useful for the activity, and present it beforehand. If you aren't sure what this language might be, you could do a 'practice run' yourself with another teacher, if possible record it, then make a note of the vocabulary you used.

Want to know more? Go to intermediate **teacher's book, how to ... do free speaking (try it out) p.164.**

Using this approach, learners will have an immediate opportunity to practise, consolidate, and recycle the new vocabulary. Here is an example of this type of pro-active vocabulary work in **wordbooster** unit five.

- 1 Fill the gaps with an appropriate verb. Sometimes more than one is possible.**

cheat	fail	take	get through	do
prepare	sit	come up	turn up	bluff
go on	retake	pass	take place	make a mess of

- 2 With a partner, ask and answer the questions.**

the driving test in your country

the practical test

- 1 Where does the practical test usually _____ ?
- 2 If you _____ for the test a few minutes' late, are you still allowed to _____ it?
- 3 If (unfortunately) you _____ the test, how long do you have to wait before you can _____ it? Do you think that's about right?
- 4 Do people ever _____ in the test?

the written exam

- 5 Do you have to _____ a written exam as well as a practical one?
- 6 Is there a specific book you have to use to _____ for the written exam? Do you think that's a good idea?
- 7 What kinds of questions are likely to _____ in the exam? Do you think the questions are sensible?
- 8 If you manage to _____ the written, can you _____ to the practical straight afterwards? Or does the practical exam come first?
- 9 Is it possible to _____ your way through it if you don't know the answers?

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit five, p.61.

The activity is very controlled, so using the target language should not be difficult. At the same time, new language is personalized and learners have an opportunity for creative output by sharing each other's knowledge and experience.

think!⁴

You are planning to do the activity below in which learners will need to express their willingness (or not) to do these things. What phrases might you pre-teach them?

- 2 **Think!** Which of these would you be prepared to do in your free time? Put a tick ✓, a cross ✗, or 'maybe'.
- Help a child who has problems with reading.
 - Take an elderly person's dog for a walk two or three times a week.
 - Give up a weekend to clear waste land which will be used for a children's playground.
 - Take a small group of teenagers camping for a weekend.
 - Babysit three small noisy children regularly for a neighbour.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit seven p.82

go to **answer key p.166**

5 Self-study

As learners become more proficient, they should find it easier to improve their English and expand their vocabulary outside class. For example, they can

- read books and magazines written in English
- make effective use of ELT monolingual dictionaries
- listen to cassettes and CDs in English
- listen to the lyrics of songs recorded in English
- watch films in English or follow films with English subtitles
- watch one or more of the increasing number of TV channels in English that are available around the world, e.g. CNN
- use the Internet (reading websites and using opportunities to chat on-line)
- join English-speaking clubs in many cities around the world.

In theory, these sources are available to everyone, but for lower level learners it is very difficult to benefit from input that is a long way above their own level. Upper-intermediate learners should have the knowledge and confidence to be able to take advantage of these sources, but to do this successfully – in some cases, to do it at all – they will probably need encouragement, and some learners will also need training, which starts in class.

using dictionaries

We have discussed the importance and value of making use of dictionaries in another chapter, and you will also find regular activities in **wordbooster** in the **student's book**, which is designed to teach learners about dictionary features and give them practice in using them. It is also important for learners to keep effective records of the new vocabulary they encounter, otherwise many of these items will be forgotten very quickly.

Want to know more? Go to **how to ...** use dictionaries with learners p.174.

keeping vocabulary records

There is no single correct way to keep vocabulary records: ultimately, the best system is the one the learner feels comfortable with and is willing to maintain. If possible though, we think it will help learners to incorporate some of the following suggestions:

- Keep records in a book that is easy to carry around (and have more than one book).
- Divide the book into sections so that the lexis is organized and learners can easily retrieve items they need, e.g. have pages for specific topics, or for verbs followed by a particular preposition, and so on. In some cases, it will be valuable to enter items in more than one place.
- Make a note of the key information about items: the item, the part of speech, the pronunciation, the meaning (in English, or in the mother tongue), and an example showing how the word is typically used. You will need to demonstrate to learners how to do this.

get away with sth (v) do sth wrong, but not be caught or punished

People drive above the speed limit and most get away with it.

flood (v/n) /flʌd/ inundar, inundación

The floods in the south have made thousands homeless.

- Remember that lexis consists of phrases as well as individual words, and in both cases always include the new items in typical examples alongside other words that often combine with them.

examples

aware She isn't even aware of the problem.

get on sb's nerves That noise is really getting on my nerves.

- Try to make the book look interesting, e.g. use pictures or diagrams so that pages are more eye-catching and items stand out.

Without being too dogmatic, you can obviously look at the records your learners are keeping and give advice where you feel it is appropriate. You can also get learners to look at each others' notes for ideas.

learning outside class

To encourage your learners to carry on learning outside class, you can use or adapt this simple activity.

try it out learn a word / phrase and teach it

I did this on a regular basis with higher level students I taught during a vocabulary option class.

Between each lesson (they had one every day for a month), I asked each student to find one new word or phrase (from a book, TV, Internet, or wherever). The only conditions were that it had to be, in their view, useful and relevant, and they had to be able to explain it and give clear examples of its use. At the start of the lesson they would then mingle and explain their item and learn others. I set a time limit to focus the learners, but I was also flexible with this if the group was clearly engaged in the activity and useful lexical items were being circulated.

At first, one or two students forgot to do it, and several others chose words or phrases that weren't very useful. However, within a week of persevering with this, students rarely forgot, and the quality of the lexis they introduced improved as time went on. They were motivated to learn other people's items as well as teach their own, and it also provided them with a lot of genuine interaction and practice in explaining and paraphrasing.

I kept a record of all the items brought to class and gave the students short revision tests on the lexis (usually orally) every few days.

Stuart, London.

Again, in theory, you can do this with any level, but it does work more effectively with higher level learners who have the ability to explain and paraphrase quite effectively; with lower levels it can become frustrating if they don't have the language to explain new items satisfactorily.

conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at

- how we can help upper-intermediate learners to express themselves in more complex ways, and at greater length using natural English expressions, chunks, and link words and phrases
- the importance of style at this level, and differences between written and spoken English
- the use of spoken and written text as a major source of new lexis, e.g. exploiting spoken texts by doing text search activities using the tapescript
- a pro-active approach to vocabulary work which involves planning speaking activities and anticipating the vocabulary which will be necessary to accomplish the activity
- ways of training upper-intermediate learners to expand their vocabulary outside the classroom, by for instance, improving dictionary use and record keeping.

answer key

think!¹ p.161

- 1 on earth; the hell (informal, and may be offensive)
- 2 Sorry to bother you.
- 3 really / very / incredibly; of you
- 4 such; great / huge
- 5 have a word with you
- 6 in your shoes, in your position
- 7 all over the world
- 8 keep an eye on

think!² p.162

individual words: *hunter, coward, scatter*

Learners will probably seize on *moose* and *baloney*, although neither is very useful beyond this text.

chunks: *in the middle of nowhere* = somewhere remote; *leave sth behind*, (learners would probably say *leave sth*); *make it* = succeed in reaching a place (or one's goal); *(turn) upside down* (there is no other way to express this idea as clearly as this phrase); *all over the place* = everywhere

think!³ p.162

- 1 **(just) in case** signals the possibility of an event happening, so it could finish like this: *the children arrived home before us.*
- 2 **even though** suggests that the rest of the clause will be in contrast or against what one might expect, e.g. *nobody was at home.*
- 3 **Mind you** indicates you are going to say something which is the opposite of what you have just said, e.g. *she's better than the last one.*
- 4 **Besides** signals an addition of an extra fact or reason in this case, e.g. *I've got too much work to do at the moment.*
- 5 **predictably** indicates the speaker's attitude, i.e. *true to character, he hasn't tidied it yet.*
- 6 **the trouble is** warns the listener that a negative point will follow, e.g. *he never pays it back, or I'm a bit short of money myself at the moment.*

1 p.163

more formal bequeath, remuneration, purchase

neutral inherit, be well-off, invest

more informal be rolling in money, be hard up, pricey

think!⁴ p.164

This language is from a **natural English** box in upper-intermediate **student's book**, unit seven p.82.

I'd be willing / prepared to do that.

I wouldn't mind doing that.

I'd be (a bit) reluctant to do that.

I'd find it (a bit) hard to do that.

glossary

a fixed expression¹ An expression in which the individual words combine with a special meaning and these words cannot be changed, e.g. *never mind* not ~~*never care*~~; *the tip of the iceberg* not ~~*the top of the iceberg*~~ or ~~*the top of an iceberg*~~; *a red herring* not ~~*a reddish herring*~~.

a semi-fixed expression² An expression which allows a limited degree of change, e.g. *it's up to you / him / her, have a nice day / swim / meal.*

discourse markers³ Words and expressions which in different ways show how the discourse develops and is constructed, e.g. *As I was saying*, relates to something that was said before; *however*, signals and emphasizes a contrast; *by the way ...*, indicates a change of subject.

discourse⁴ Pieces of language which are longer than a sentence.

follow up

Swan M 1995 (second edition) *Practical English Usage* Oxford University Press

Lewis M 1997 *Implementing the Lexical Approach* LTP

Lewis M 2000 *Teaching Collocation* LTP

McCarthy M 1990 *Vocabulary* Oxford University Press