

ielts test takers at preparatory programs in the uae

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Introduction

Standardized test preparation courses such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in preparatory programmes at government and private universities in the United Arab Emirates (The UAE) prepare students to meet their exit score requirement.

Curriculum planning has been driven towards these tests. Some research studies (Read and Hayes, 2003) warned against that type of curriculum in that it is restricted to those areas that are to be tested with no balance or integrated skills course design. Curriculum designers therefore depend heavily on materials geared to practice for the required exam. Moreover, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) argue that these type of curriculum are characterised by ‘teaching to the test’ and even text-book slaves.

On the other hand, this essay will argue that designing and implementing curriculum that is supported by materials that reflect and meet the test question types and objectives can be beneficial to students preparing for standardised tests in the UAE. This paper will be outlined as follows: After introducing the conceptual framework of the essay, it will highlight the IELTS’ marking criteria of ‘Lexical Resource’ and ‘Grammatical Range’ in the hope to establish the argument that half of the IELTS marking criteria is based on lexical and grammatical items.

Then, the type of lexical and structural syllabus that can be proposed to meet students’ needs in enhancing the aspect of English Language accuracy will be described. Some practical guidelines will then be provided for

designing a lexical-structural syllabus. Conceptual Framework This essay falls within the conceptual framework of critical theory and critical pedagogy.

From a social reconstructionism perspective, critical theory and critical pedagogy call for critically re-addressing status quo issues in education. Paulo Freire (1972), a critical theorist, believes that in most education systems there exists a hidden curriculum that underlines the status quo supported by the dominant culture and thus repressing minority subcultures. Curriculum planning should undergo a constant progressive change due to the progressive nature of the country and educational systems in the UAE.

Curriculum change at the level of preparatory programmes is an inseparable part of this change since it is observed that research has provided enough evidence see published annually (IELTS, 2011) that in the UAE and other Arab countries where the majority of students and IELTS test takers struggle to reach a level of proficiency matching score band 5.0 that enables them to proceed to their major.

This judgment is supported by professional and formal data provided in Table 1 below which is adapted from the IELTS Annual Review of 2011. These records include a comparison of IELTS results by mother tongue candidates and by country of origin for the many countries using the IELTS tests.

It is shocking to learn that the UAE with all of its progressive trends in economy and education, coupled with billions of dollars supporting the educational system where ministries of Higher education and Education receive about 22 % of the total budget in the UAE (Ministry of Finance, 2011), is ranked at the bottom of the ranking list in IELTS scores (See Appendix A).

This inexplicable fact urgently calls for critical pedagogy in education and in curriculum design in order to problematise the issue and arrive at proper and sustainable solutions.

This is why this essay adopts a critical pedagogical approach. Within critical pedagogy paradigm, “ curriculum perspective emphasizes the roles schools and learners can and should play in addressing social injustices and inequality. Curriculum development is not seen as a neutral process. ” (Richards, 2001: 118). Similarly, Freire (1972) and Apple (1986) contend that schools do not present equal opportunities so learners and teachers must be engaged to address important social and personal problems and seek learners’ empowerment.

Morris (1995: 10), furthermore, argues “ Social injustices and inequality would be central issues in the curriculum. ” Accordingly, curriculum designers in the UAE should study at the context in which learners are taught and start to constantly problematise current issues in order to improve their designs. In Applied linguistics, Pennycook (2001: 5) asserts that applied linguistics from a critical pedagogy perspective “ is always concerned how the classroom, text, or conversation is related to broader social cultural and political relations,”.

This paper is intended to problematise the issue of curriculum design in the UAE context in that it seeks to establish that solid elements of lexical-structural syllabus can lead to a better success rate in IELTS. IELTS Marking Rubrics: Lexical Resources & Grammatical Range While ample IELTS research studies in university environments is available (see research

reports in IELTS. org), there appears to be less research on the impact of Speaking and Writing assessment criteria or IELTS band descriptors on syllabus design.

IELTS measures both test candidates' abilities to produce different sentence structures, and the range and appropriateness of vocabulary. Consequently, lexical resources and grammatical range are regarded as significant constituents of the speaking and writing assessment, since they determine the level of vocabulary and grammar in speaking and writing the test candidates use. Test candidates are rated using detailed descriptors in IELTS. In the Speaking test, these describe spoken performance according to four different criteria: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical resources, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation.

In the Writing test, the descriptors assess candidates in terms of: Task achievement or response, Coherence and cohesion, Lexical Resources, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (IELTS handbook, 2004: 18-23). It is clear from the speaking and writing assessment criteria that lexical resources and grammatical range constitute half of the assessment. They describe test takers' level in grammar and vocabulary in the speaking and writing modules in detail. They should therefore occupy a big part of any curriculum design for IELTS preparation syllabus.

Accordingly, this essay argues that a balanced lexical-structural syllabus can help in meeting the course objectives and students' needs of any IELTS preparation course. Lexical Syllabus: Empowering students' Lexical Resources in IELTS Historically, syllabuses were not lexical but structural.

With the advent of the Communicative Approach, new ideas in syllabus design have been introduced with a focus on functions. In 1990, when Willis wrote *The Lexical Syllabus*, a large amount of attention to the Lexical syllabus surfaced. Willis (1990, P. vi)) identified three major aspects for lexis in lexical syllabus.

First, the language to be learned should be somehow graded to make it easier for the learners to understand. Second, the language should be selected carefully without random exposure. Thirdly, the language syllabus should be itemised Over the past thirty years the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), however, has not emphasized direct instruction of vocabulary or grammar (Laufer 2006). CLT should therefore be regarded as inappropriate for IELTS preparation exam courses and more explicit instruction of lexis and grammar could help students achieve their desired score in IELTS.

In fact, according to Zahar, Cobb and Spada (2001), three periods of direct English instruction every week would lead to the incidental learning of only 70 new words a year. Therefore, acquisition of vocabulary through reading must be supplemented by direct instruction, which can be supported by incorporating a lexical syllabus. In addition, the lexical syllabus can make academic English vocabulary needed in IELTS more learnable to lower-level learners.

There is also a well established connection between vocabulary knowledge and successful academic reading (Corson 1997; Nation 2001: 144-149). Thus, the significance of incorporating lexical syllabus is significantly clear

for large-scale high-stakes tests such as IELTS that assess the range of vocabulary exhibited in a student's writing and speaking (See Appendix A). It should be admitted that producing satisfactory IELTS writing and speaking responses is not achieved by just learning individual vocabulary and grammatical structures.

However, lexical items can lead to further enhancing students overall proficiency in IELTS. Some research ((Laufer, 2005; Nation 2001) has proven that lexical resources are the basis for comprehending grammar and lexical meanings. It is also the most important predictor of writing production (Read, 2002) and reading comprehension (Beck et. al. 1987: 147). In the IELTS speaking test, a similar lexical diversity would also be needed as suggested by Read (2005) who found that diverse lexical resources with some sophistication are rated higher.

Regarding the adequate vocabulary range for academic success in international standardised tests, researchers (Laufer, 1992; Nation, 2001) argued that students, depending on the genre, need about 3, 000 words in order for them to be able to read ungraded academic text and that the minimum wordfamilylevel is the 3, 000 word level needed for reading an unsimplified text. For IELTS reading texts, about 4, 000 word families might be needed, 2, 000 of General Service List (GSL) and about 570 words from the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 1998) and about 1, 000 technical words, proper nouns and low frequency vocabulary (Nation, 2001: 147).

Accordingly, commercially-produced syllabi such as Headway do not provide the wide range of lexical resources needed by the students (Horst, 2005;

Lee, 2007) in order for them to develop their lexis repertoire and to hence get the score required to pass IELTS. Moreover, there is enough suggestive research evidence (See Beaton, Gruneder and Ellis, 1995 – in Nation, 2001) that would indicate that the more vocabulary range manifested in speaking, the higher the score a student would get in writing.

This shows that direct learning is in fact both effective and efficient and that the AWL can provide a reasonable target vocabulary for IELTS preparation courses and syllabi. In terms of the relation of grammar and vocabulary, David Wilkins (cited in Lewis, 2000: 8) noted that “ Without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. This statement brings to focus the significance of incorporating lexical with a grammatical element when designing a syllabus aiming at enhancing students’ structural language system and accuracy and hence achieving a higher score in IELTS.

The following section will shed some light on the significance of developing students’ accuracy through grammatical structures in structural syllabi.

Structural Syllabus: Revisiting grammatical syllabus

The structural syllabus comprises of a group of grammatical items that are selected and graded according to simplicity and complexity (Nunan, 1988). A structural-lexical syllabus’ principle objective is to help the learners acquire the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the language they are learning.

The grammatical structures are usually presented in a certain sequence, for example, present followed by past, or in contrasting pairs, for example, simple present versus simple past (Long and Crookes, 1993). Wilkins (1976)

describes this type of syllabus design approach as synthetic in which the various parts of language are separately taught and there is a “ gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up”. (p. 2) Wilkins suggests language is structured into smaller items and units in a structural syllabus and then it is presented discretely.

Wilkins argues that this exposes learners to particular samples of language in which one grammatical feature dominates each lesson in the syllabus. This is mainly based on the hypothesis that grammatical and lexical rules are learned in an additive process, by which learners gain complete mastery of each item before a new one is taught (Nunan, 1988). It is hence the learner's task to re-synthesize the grammatical and lexical items that have been presented in a separate way (Wilkins, 1976). An important question raised here is the set of criteria teachers used to select which lexical and grammatical were to be used in the structural syllabus.

This will be reviewed in the following sections. Selection of Lexical and Grammatical Items in Lexical-structural Syllabus: Mackey (1965) takes the stance that the lexical items in a structural syllabus are to be selected on the basis of criteria of frequency, coverage, availability, and learnability (White 1988: 49-50). In the 1990s, the lexical approach in teaching and learning started to gain formal prominence among many researchers (Willis, 1990; Willis, 1996). As proposed by the lexical approach, a target reservoir of vocabulary is suggested to be learned at a specific level (Willis, 1990; Willis, 1996).

These target vocabulary are derived from old corpus analysis of written and spoken English, but this could be regarded now as old-fashioned with the advancement of computerized corpus. However, one view, suggested by Richards (2001: 154) is that lexical syllabuses were among the early types of syllabuses to be designed in language teaching. Regarding grammar structure, Mackey also (1965) proposes four criteria for the selection grammatical structures: simplicity, regularity, frequency, and contrastive difficulty.

The last item, contrastive difficulty, means that learning some items at an early stage should resemble the same item acquired in L1 (cited in Wilkins 1976: 6). These views of language selection have been challenged (e. g. , Ellis 2001). due to its lack of empirical experiments. Thus to determining the level of complexity, simplicity, regularity, etc. is almost entirely based on language teachers and syllabus designers' common sense judgments. This dilemma, addressed in the following section, is one of the major shortcomings of the structural syllabus.

Structural Syllabus: Drawbacks A number of limitations have been identified with the structural syllabus. The first shortcoming is drawn from Corder's (1967) "built-in syllabus" concept in which learners' acquisition of different grammatical items is based on a natural order. This notion is supported by many researchers (for example, Hyltenstam and Pienemann, 1985). Within the framework of a built-in syllabus, grammatical complexity of a structure is not the reason for the difficulty of learning a structure of a language item.

For instance, a common example of Arab Learners' frequent mistakes is the acquisition of third person " s" morpheme (Hajjaj, 1999). Even though an averageteachercan explain this item very well to Arabic learners, it always poses a challenge to them, which means difficulty or simplicity of language structure doesn't always guarantee proper learning. This should be taken into serious consideration when designing a lexical-grammatical syllabus for IELTS preparation courses and thus adding meaningful activities that make the structures more memorable and relevant to learners' needs and levels.

The second main negative aspect of the structural syllabus is its lack of language functions. The structural syllabus is a reliable tool for assisting language learners to perfect common grammar rules. However, in terms of sociolinguistics, structural syllabus can prepare learners to be grammatically competent but communicatively incompetent (Johnson, 1982). A learner who replies ' Yes, I do. ' to ' Do you mind if I open the window? ' is a typical example of a learner whose command of English grammar might be ideal yet they are not capable of producing socially appropriate utterances.

In other words, the structural syllabus helps learners produce instances of language usage rather than language use (Widdowson, 1978). Accordingly, syllabus designers who consider implementing lexical-structural syllabus need to promote both usage and use in order to avoid turning the language introduced into something meaningless. Socially contextualised and relevant language items introduced appropriately within interactive technique can bridge the gap between use and usage and make grammar teachable and learnable. This will be discussed in the following section.

The Structural Syllabus and Grammar Teaching

Before advocating a lexical-grammatical syllabus, it is necessary to first establish the significance of explicit grammar teaching and learning. One debate in second language pedagogy has been about the teachability of grammar. Some scholars have argued against teaching grammar since it leads to only minimal achievement in the acquisition of linguistic competence in English (Krashen, 1982; Krashen and Terrel, 1983; Prabhu, 1987). Others have contended that explicitly teaching formal grammar plays a significant role in the development of the L2 learners' interlanguage system (Rutherford, 1987; Ellis, 1990, 1993).

This paper supports the grammarians' arguments in favor of formal grammar instruction that enhances IELTS' UAE students and test takers' accuracy. The first argument is based on studies on the emergence of immersion programs in Canada where many English L1 students study French and thus have been immersed in meaning- focused input in French (Swain, 1985; Swain and Lapkin, 1995). The results of research studies revealed that the majority of students have developed native-like receptive skills, but their productive ones are still far from native-like norms.

This has therefore suggested that meaning-focused input instruction, which is devoid of any formal grammar teaching, is more likely to result in fossilization. The second argument defending formal grammar instruction derives from research (e. g. , Felix, 1985; White, 1987; Schachter, 1989) that suggests that adult L2 learners cannot have full access to the same

acquisition resources as children with L1 do. This makes positive evidence such as formal instruction and corrective feedback.

White (1987: 105) finds that French learners of English as a second language tend to make sentences like ' John drank slowly his coffee' (John buvait lentement son cafe). These types of sentences are grammatically incorrect in English, but acceptable in their language. Those learners receiving positive evidence cannot notice that there are certain rules for adverb position within a sentence in English unless they are taught so by formal grammar instruction, which implies that lexical-structural syllabus can play a decisive role in some formal aspects of L2 learning and thus in IELTS preparation courses.

The third argument has been proposed by Ellis (1990, 1993) who argues that formal grammar instruction develops explicit awareness of grammatical elements which hence helps learners acquire implicit knowledge. Ellis believes that the explicit knowledge of grammar instruction facilitates learning in three methods (1993: 98). First, it encourages them to monitor their language before and after production. Terrell (1991: 61) observes that " monitoring can apparently interact with acquisition, resulting in learners acquiring their own output" which shows the importance of monitoring in formal language instruction.

Second, explicit teaching and learning support the factor of noticing certain elements in the input. Therefore, " if learners know that plural nouns have an —s, they are more likely to notice the —s on the ends of nouns they hear or read in input and also more likely to associate the —s morpheme with the

meaning more than one". (Ellis, 1993: 98). This example illustrates how specific features of grammar are best learned explicitly.

Third, formal and explicit grammar knowledge assists learners in noticing some gaps in their language production. Thus if, for instance, Arab learners learn that verbs take an -s in the third person singular form, they are more likely to notice the gap when adding the third person singular -s or not, which leads to more accurate production later as they produce similar structures. Furthermore, Celce-Murica (1991: 467-468) suggests that formal lexical and grammar teaching can enhance meaning and social function.

For instance, drawing attention to the different spatial denotation of the prepositions in and on the learner will " find it useful to know quite explicitly that ' in' favors the placement of objects in three-dimensional containers and ' on' favors the placement of objects on two-dimensional flat surfaces" if provided with formal instruction. Second, in an example of grammar enhancing social functions, Celce-Murcia discusses that learners need to be aware of the different modal auxiliaries uses in polite requests such as the difference between " Can you open the door? and " Could you open the door?". Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988: 4) believe that learners need to study grammar because many of them are to take part in international tests such as IELTS and that " Typically, a major component of such exams is grammar. Therefore, to give these students an incomplete grounding in grammar, regardless of one's conviction about teaching it, is to do them a great disservice. Students have to know and apply the rules of English grammar in order to do well on such tests. A relatively recent argument proposed by Ellis

(2001) argues that it is a mistake to suppose that learning foreign languages in schools is entirely to promote communication among speakers of different languages. Learning foreign languages has a more valuable end, i. e. promoting intellectual growth. (Ellis 2001: 172) thus views learning a foreign language as a means to develop cognitive abilities and that grammar contains knowledge that contributes to learners' cognitive skills.

If one considers all the arguments discussed earlier in this essay claiming that formal teaching of lexical and grammatical items should be an indivisible part of any English classes, structural-lexical syllabus seems indispensable for students preparing for international examination such as IELTS and TOEFL. This is, however, only my conviction within my teaching context and does not entail that curriculum designers and teachers are to revert to old traditional language teaching methodologies such as grammar-translation method. I believe that adopting a merely lexical and/or structural syllabus has not survived in language education because they overemphasized the aspect of grammar teaching through many tedious structural drills. I believe that it is unfair to judge that grammar and lexical instruction should be eliminated simply because of insufficiencies of audio-lingual or grammar-translation methods. A well-balanced lexical-structural syllabus can be safely employed, especially in IELTS preparation courses, provided that it is supplemented by motivating and communicative tasks

Suggested steps to design a Lexical-Structural Syllabus According to Stern (1983: 339-340), there are major differences between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Accordingly, EFL and

ESL students are positioned in different learning conditions. ESL students learn Target Language (TL) in a more supportive setting in that they are more exposed to TL in its natural environment EFL. Considering needs and motivation, ESL students are more required and motivated to communicate with foreigners than EFL students.

Thus, ESL students learning needs are definitely not centered on one factor or need. As previously discussed, the majority of Arab students in the UAE are EFL learners who study English in order to pass national exams, such as IELTS. This educational structure of teaching applies in the EFL environment in the UAE. Based on my observations and experience, I found that students in Emirati high schools are also required to learn specific discrete items such as vocabulary and grammatical items without any exposure to communicative tasks that enable them to use these items meaningfully.

Unfortunately, only those who wish to pursue their higher education strive to master the grammatical and vocabulary items of their course books in order for them to achieve the required score of the university entrance exams. When taking these conditions into serious consideration, I have come to realize the reason why lexical and grammar instruction can, and perhaps should, be an essential component of any curriculum in the Emirati EFL educational system in schools, and this can be possible through the lexical-structural syllabus proposed in this essay.

It is argued that (Richards, 2001) old and traditional language teaching methods did not succeed not because they adhered to a structural or lexical syllabus but because the implementation process was too mechanical

through dull drills of discrete language items. I believe that a well-designed lexical-structural syllabus proposed in this essay can survive through two types of tasks: consciousness-raising and communicative tasks. Consciousness-raising activities can develop explicit knowledge and communicative tasks improve the implicit knowledge of lexical and grammatical structures (Ellis, 2001).

As defined by Ellis (1993: 109), consciousness-raising is "a deliberate attempt on the part of the teacher to make the learners aware of specific features of the L2". The following task in Table 2 (Ellis, 2001: 173) is a straightforward sample of a consciousness-raising (CR) activity that is designed to help learners be conscious of the difference between the prepositions 'for' and 'since'. Table 2. An Example of a CR Problem-solving Task: 1. Here is some information about when three people joined the company they now work for and how long they have been working there.

Name	Date Joined	Length of Time
Ms Regan	1945	45 yrs
Mr Bush	1970	20 yrs
Ms Thatcher	1989	9 mths
Mr Baker	1990 (Feb)	10 days

2. Study these sentences about these people. When is "for" used and when is "since" used? a. Ms Regan has been working for her company for most of her life. b. Mr Bush has been working for his company since 1970. c. Ms Thatcher has been working for her company for 9 months. . Mr Baker has been working for his company since February. 3. Which of the following sentences are ungrammatical? Why? a. Ms Regan has been working for her company for 1945. b. Mr Bush has been working for his company for 20 years. c. Ms Thatcher has been working for her company since 1989. d. Mr Baker has

been working for his company since 10 days. 4. Try and make up a rule to explain when " for" and " since" are used. 5. Make up one sentence about when you started to learn English and one sentence about how long you have been studying English.

Use " for" and " since". | It is my argument that if this exercise is supported by a communicative task where learners interact in pairs or with the classroom teacher it would enable them to internalise the target structure and use it in real-life communication. Designing a lexical-structural based syllabus is not a very hard task. There are many resources based on well-established research that can help syllabus designers build up their course (Lewis, 1997a, 1997b). This essay offers some suggestions on how to build a lexical-structural activities and syllabus.

First, syllabus designers need to settle a relevant set of structures, vocabulary and different types of collocations (Lewis, 1997a) and organise them according to their increasing complexity, starting from simple structures to complex ones. Second, syllabus designers should choose categories of vocabulary items to be learned and sequence the categories according to situational and functional characteristics such as vocabulary related topics such as environment, health, internet, education and so on since IELTS module is commonly based on globally social topics.

Third, syllabus designers should integrate the group of vocabulary and structures together into learning objectives to base the units of lexical-structural syllabus. Although this essay advocates the implementation of a lexical-structural syllabus in IELTS preparation course at preparatory

programmes in the UAE, it is necessary to admit that an eclectic and multi-focus syllabus which includes a wide range of components, specifically vocabulary, structures introduced through functions and, situations can allow for a two-sided approach.

This can emphasise the importance of systematically learning specific vocabulary and structures and building up linguistic knowledge, and at the same time it can focus on meeting immediate language communicative needs and sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Conclusion In my essay, I only propose that lexical-structural syllabus can safely be employed in EFL settings, particularly in the UAE. Previously, it was argued that the majority of EFL students in the UAE must score reasonably high in their university entrance English exams. This condition requires them to learn many grammatical and lexical structures.

It is my suggestion that a lexical-structural syllabus can efficiently serve this purpose. Nevertheless, this argument should not be interpreted as a call for a return to old approaches such as the grammar-translation method. What I have attempted to proposed in this essay is two-fold. First, designing a well-balanced external syllabus that adequately matches the learners' internal syllabus and second, empowering this potential syllabus with innovative learning ideas and tasks discussed earlier, such as consciousness-raising and communicative tasks.

I hope my recommendations will breathe fresh life into the body of the proposed lexical-structural syllabus.

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