



## Word of the Day

Independent lexical development initiatives empower and equip language learners with skills to boost their lexical repertoires. Language instructors can train learners to be autonomous word learners. A sample activity, namely word of the day, is presented in this article. The activity is an independent lexical learning task, which aims to develop the lexical range of language learners through self-regulated endeavors. This activity builds on the lexical approach, which lays emphasis on expanding learners' lexical base in the belief that grammar is embedded in lexis. Thus, the role of "word grammar" overshadows the sentence grammar instruction. The word-of-the-day task acquaints learners with unpacking the lexical information in a word or phrase and sharing their lexical discoveries with the class. The activity could be systematically integrated into the course syllabus. Learners will value lexis as a rich resource of syntactical knowledge and will realize that lexical development is directly proportional to linguistic fluency.

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day*

*Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime* (Chinese proverb)

### Introduction

In EFL instruction, there is no dearth of tasks and activities that can potentially facilitate learners' vocabulary development. However, it is worth noting that no one set of lexical development activities or tasks can be regarded as effective in every teaching context. As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of any classroom task depends upon a host of factors, such as learner motivation, pedagogical approaches, task relevance to learners' needs, and the like. In this article, I suggest a sample activity, namely *word of the day*, for language learners. It is a simple and easy-to-use independent language-item learning task, which aims to develop the lexical repertoires of language learners through self-regulated lexical learning endeavors. This activity ties together the lexical approach theory (delineated below) and practice, and in my EFL instruction experience I have found the activity quite effective in expanding students' lexical ranges. My students had low-intermediate-level linguistic proficiency and were enrolled in undergraduate programs at a public university in the Sultanate of Oman.

In recent years, the lexical approach to language instruction has gained the attention of language professionals because of a growing awareness of the

view that lexis is the core of a language system. This view is also the key notion of the minimalist program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000). In the lexical approach, instructional practices focus on developing learners' linguistic proficiency by enhancing their lexical base in the belief that grammar is embedded in lexis (e.g., collocations, lexical phrases). Thus, the role of "word grammar" overshadows sentence grammar instruction (Lewis, 1993). In other words, at the macro level "language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar" (Lewis, 1993, p. vi). That is why the lexical approach is generally considered an alternative to grammar-based language-teaching approaches. The taxonomy of lexical items, according to Lewis (1997), includes words (e.g., table, naive), poly words (e.g., put off, turn around), collocations (e.g., work hard, deliver a speech), and institutionalized utterances (e.g., Can we take a rain check? This sounds good to me).

In accordance with the above prefatory note, I have come to realize in my EFL/ESL teaching that the acquisition of lexicogrammatical strings (i.e., institutionalized utterances) and formulae (e.g., *apologies for the delay, pleased/nice to meet you, appreciate it, pardon me, have fun*, etc.) by learners through their own discovery remarkably facilitates their linguistic proficiency, especially in writing both at sentential and suprasentential levels (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This finding about the significance of lexical discoveries is also authenticated by the lexical approach (e.g., Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Willis, 1990). Moreover, linguistic fluency greatly depends upon a learner's acquisition of a substantial reserve of lexical formulae. This is because "it is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency," and the lexical reserve also directs learners' "attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced" [i.e., grammaticalized lexis] (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 32). I believe the existing collection of lexical strings (also referred to as "chunks," such as multiwords and idioms) that a language learner acquires is not only a rich resource of linguistic items but also an information bank of grammatical structures, which is inherent in the lexicon.

In this article I will focus on words, poly words, and collocations, because learners with low-intermediate or intermediate-level proficiency usually struggle with these lexical categories, while language courses at this level also target words and collocations in vocabulary-development exercises. Furthermore, intermediate-level learners will find it hard to explain lexicogrammatical strings in sufficient detail—a requirement for this activity.

### Objectives of the Activity

The activity aims:

- To develop a learner's lexical base through a *self-discovery* process;
- To raise learners' awareness of continuous enrichment of their lexical range to improve their language proficiency;
- To enhance learners' familiarity with different shades of word meaning and different word forms (e.g., inflection, derivation, conversion);

- To train learners to become effective users of words or phrases in relevant and meaningful contexts;
- To promote learner autonomy in language learning as a subsidiary skill.

This activity provides learners with training in independent lexical learning and assists in regulating vocabulary development. Language learners will exchange insights into how to learn lexical items systematically and how to optimize lexical learning working on their own. Research supports the usefulness of explicit vocabulary instruction (e.g., Kelly, 1990; Nation, 2001; Stoller & Grabe, 1993). However, this activity at best is supplementary to a lexical learning segment in the curriculum, and it can not help learners with the entire range of the target vocabulary in an intermediate-level course.

### Procedure

At the beginning of the semester or term introduce the activity as mandatory course work. This objective could also be achieved by incorporating this activity in the course syllabus and making learners aware that they will be eventually assessed at the end of the course on the lexical items presented through this activity. Depending upon the class size and the course duration, the activity should be completed in three to four rounds, which will have twofold benefits. First, a substantial number of lexical items will be presented because each learner contributes three to four words at regular intervals. Second, learners will actively remain engaged in the lexical acquisition process from a variety of sources and through conscious effort.

Ask each learner to plan to share a lexical item (a word or phrase) that she or he has recently learned and found quite useful in personal or academic communication. As a caveat at this stage, tell learners not to choose either a common word or phrase or one that is very unusual for the activity. This precaution is indispensable because either most of the learners are already familiar with the item or are not able to use it in everyday communication (in the case of an infrequent lexical item). However, pinpointing neutral words between *too common* (high frequency) and *too unusual* (low frequency) is not straightforward (Nation, 2001). This problem could be dealt with by excluding some specific lexical groups such as proper nouns, technical jargon, and slang. Additionally, the possible sources of item discovery could be delimited, for instance, to social communication, media programs, and nonspecialized reading materials such as newspapers, sports magazines, storybooks, and the like. Table 1 presents some examples of word-of-the-day items from different courses I have taught. During the initial run-through, I usually show the students a slide with these examples to illustrate the three categories.

One or two learners can be assigned to share words of the day in each class session. At the start of the semester or term, pass out a sign-up sheet for a word-of-the-day minipresentation of a 5-minute duration. Through the sign-up, learners will commit to their contributions according to their pedagogical convenience, because systematic lexical learning might be a revealing as well as

**Table 1**  
**Lexical Items at Intermediate Level**

<i>Too-unusual items</i>	<i>Neutral items</i>	<i>Too-common items</i>
Circumcision	To give in	To go upstairs
By dint of	To make haste	Turn off, on
Gastronomical preferences	To fall apart	Dial
Pathology	Statistics	Percentage
Bon voyage	Never mind	Excuse me

a novel experience for many learners with intermediate-level proficiency. Invite each learner to present her or his word of the day at any point in the lesson in accordance with the schedule of minipresentations.

Initially, model a word-of-the-day minipresentation yourself. To familiarize learners with the amazing multidimensionality of the lexicon, introduce a word or a phrase with its fullest picture. This picture should not only provide orthographic and phonetic representation but also syntactic and semantic features of the selected lexical item. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), “to really know a word” involves the following information:

- spelling (orthography)
- phonetic representation (pronunciation, syllabification, and stress)
- morphological irregularity (where applicable)
- syntactic features and restrictions (including part of speech)
- common derivations and collocations (i.e., words with which it co-occurs)
- semantic features and restrictions
- pragmatic features and restrictions (p. 30)

Furthermore, Finegan (2004) concludes that four types of information about a word are needed to use the word in any kind of discourse. This set of lexical information includes phonological, semantic, morphological, and syntactic information (also, Nation, 1990). The modeled word presentation by the instructor should exhibit as much information as possible about a word or phrase. This exemplification is consequential to independent learning, because it serves as training in how to unpack the multidimensionality of a lexical item or string. See the Appendix for a sample of an instructor’s model presentation, which I used in my practice.

During the presentations, learners should proceed as follows:

- Step 1: Write the item on the whiteboard (orthographical manifestation).
- Step 2: Pronounce the word (phonological realization).
- Step 3: Describe the item as a part of speech (syntactical information).
- Step 4: Explain the meaning of the item (semantic explanation).
- Step 5: Present the word forms and restrictions, such as cognates and collocations (lexical information).

- Step 6: Share two or three original example sentences to demonstrate the item usage (syntactical use).
- Step 7: Ask all learners in the class to write down about two sentences using the item, in 1 minute.
- Step 8: Ask a few learners to share their example sentences.

These steps represent fragments of lexical information. Each presenter can decide for himself or herself the extent of information to include in each step. Furthermore, to retain the *independent-learning* and *self-discovery* features of the activity, only the meaning in the original context should be shared (Step 4). However, learners may shed some light on the multiple meanings of the item. Likewise, the instructor will have minimum or no interference in the activity (Steps 1 through 8), and the presenter will be wholly responsible for the accuracy of the information.

### Follow-Up

#### ***Vocabulary Notebook***

Instruct all learners to maintain a vocabulary notebook or lexical log in which they record interesting and functional words or phrases acquired from various sources. Learners should also be required to note down all lexical items presented in the word-of-the-day activity throughout the semester or term. Learners will note down new words or phrases [I prefer the label “new words” to “difficult words”] in the notebook with the meaning and the related lexical information. In addition to writing the meanings of the words in English, learners can write the meaning in their L1 as well to make *judicious use* of their L1 (Atkinson, 1987). The use of the L1 has an added advantage in their lexical learning process in that learners will also realize that word-for-word English-L1 translations do not work, a ploy that is frequently used in many learners’ spoken and written discourse. Periodically, ask learners to show you their vocabulary notebooks. Comment on and appreciate their consistent effort in this lexeme-discovery activity.

#### ***Word Recycling***

Word learning is not a single-shot activity. Learning a lexical item is far easier than retaining or internalizing it. Word recycling (I prefer this label to “repetition”) involves multiple exposures and uses of the acquired lexical items in a variety of ways both in speech and writing. Although the fundamental objective of the word-of-the-day activity is to train or facilitate language learners in acquiring words or phrases independently, word-acquisition strategies need to be supplemented by word-retention exercises. Thus, recycling is an endeavor (or a process) to assist learners in internalizing the acquired lexical items, especially the low-frequency items.

The instructor should prepare an inventory of all the items presented through the activity. These items should be highlighted (or just hinted at) in the reading texts used in the course to make learners use the recall technique. However, all items can not be recycled through a few course reading texts. To

ensure that most of the items on the word-of-the-day inventory are recycled, additional readings or speeches could be planned. On the whole, the vocabulary notebook, reading and speaking tasks, and assessment (see below) will make word recycling possible during the semester or term in addition to some other unique recycling opportunities that each learner might experience. Word recycling implicitly makes learners realize how to internalize independently acquired lexical items.

**Assessment**

Assessment in the word-of-the-day activity has a two-pronged objective: recycling lexical items and measuring learners’ understanding of the items. Learners can be assessed in a number of ways on the lexical items in the word-of-the-day inventory. Traditional vocabulary tests (e.g., multiple-choice, true-false, gap-fill items) can be used to assess learners’ understanding of the *practical* use of the lexical items. Moreover, word-of-the-day assessment tasks can also be incorporated innovatively into regular assessment practice in the course.

At the end of each round of activity, I plan an explicit assessment activity based on the lexical inventory. Table 2 with the base form of the lexical items is used, and learners are required to complete the table (the first row has been done as an example). Additionally, learners have to produce a sentence using

**Table 2**  
**Word of the Day Assessment Sheet**  
**Part A**

<i>Item or base form/stem</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Derivatives</i>	<i>Collocations</i>	<i>Inflections</i>
To dilate (verb)	To become wider and larger	Dilation (noun), dilated (adjective)	Eye dilation, to dilate blood vessels	Dilating, dilates, dilated

To pass away

Patience

Celebration

**Part B**

**Note:** Use each of the following lexical items in a sentence so that the meaning will become clear.

To dilate

To pass away

Patience

Celebration

each item to demonstrate their pragmatic understanding of the item. The number of items in the assessment sheet depends upon the class size, which in many cases ranges from 10 to 20. For larger classes or in case of a rigidly proscribed curriculum, the assessment procedures could be modified accordingly. During this activity learners are allowed to use their vocabulary notebooks. Learners have to pronounce all the items to the instructor when handing in the completed table. The entire procedure is normally completed in less than an hour. Later, the assessment sheets are returned to the learners with the instructor's commentary. Next, learners have to resubmit the table after the requisite revision as a homework piece. The lexical inventory is also considered while designing reading tests in formal assessment during the course.

### **Reflection**

I have used the word-of-the-day activity in my EFL teaching practice within a variety of language-proficiency courses for undergraduate learners. In course evaluations and oral feedback, learners rated word of the day among the most interesting as well as useful learning activities. They considered it an opportunity to learn words or phrases independently using their own strategy-selection skill. This activity also helps in promoting learner autonomy in language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Although word of the day is quite a simple (and probably, limited) activity, it is a multifaceted learning tool for EFL learners. For instance, it enables language learners to discover strategies to enhance their lexical resources and find out various manifestations of a lexical item, in addition to gaining an understanding of the meaning-use aspect.

Nevertheless, I would like to acknowledge the fact that there is no easy way to enhance learners' lexical repertoires. It is widely agreed that lexis is central to language teaching and learning. In lexically based pedagogy a series of exciting activities, such as word of the day, should be planned to motivate and supplement learners' self-regulated and self-monitored lexical-learning initiatives (e.g., Graves, 2005; Nation, 2001). As the lexical approach suggests, there is no harm in using decontextualized lexical-item exercises, and the research has established, as mentioned earlier, the effectiveness of teaching lexis explicitly. Moreover, the word-of-the-day activity can easily be integrated in the syllabus to fulfill its supplementary role, and in a way it augments the core vocabulary development in the course. The learners and I did not face any challenge partaking in this supplementary activity, because it did not cost enough time to become a distraction, and it effectively assisted learners to unfold the "grammaticalised lexis" on their own initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

Words and phrases in social communication, like fish in water, swim briskly and are too slick to hold firmly. Language learners constantly experience this fascinating phenomenon when they come in contact with numerous words through a variety of communication events. Furthermore, words or phrases are not isolated components in a language system. Rather, language comprises a "grammaticalised lexis." This notion implies that lexis is a rich resource of

syntactical knowledge, and lexical development is directly proportional to linguistic fluency. Lexical learning is a complex process and it involves both affective and cognitive processes. In this process, language practitioners “can do a lot to sharpen students’ skills at learning words on their own” (Graves, 2005, p. 91). Lexical development for language learners is a lifelong activity, which, of course, cannot be confined to course work in a language program. Thus, training learners to become independent word learners is an extremely sought-after skill in language learning.

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## Appendix

### Sample of Instructor's Model Presentation

**Note:** The following information about a selected lexical item for a model presentation is for the course instructor's consumption. In an actual presentation, metalinguistic information needs to be adequately simplified for learners. Moreover, showing an online dictionary on a screen can potentially be very informative and practical in the model presentation.

The selected lexical item is

### *denote*

- (I) Phonologically: *Denote* is transcribed as /di-'nōt/. The second syllable is stressed.
- (II) Morphologically: *Denote* is a bisyllabic word. The following are its derived forms by suffixation:
  - Denote+s = Denotes (present verb form)
  - Denote+ed = Denoted (past and past participle verb form)
  - Denote+ing = Denoting (progressive verb form)
- (III) Semantically: The linguistic meaning of *denote* is as follows.
  - 1a: to indicate or show something  
<high body temperature *denotes* a serious illness>
  - 1b: to be a symbol or sign of something <red lights *denote* danger>Collocations are given in angled brackets.
- (IV) Lexically: *Denote* is a verb.
  - Synonyms: mean, show, indicate, signal, signify.
- (V) Syntactically: *Denote* can be used in a variety of ways in formal language.
  - Example sentences:
    1. There was a message waiting, denoting that someone had been there ahead of her.
    2. "House Full" signs in movie theaters denote the popularity of a film.
    3. This sign (X) denotes multiplication.
    4. Red eyes denote a lack of sleep.

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