Lexis: Academic Vocabulary Study
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LEXIS: ACADEMIC VOCABULARY STUDY. Arline Burgmeier, Gerry Eldred, and Cheryl Boyd Zimmerman. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1991, pp. 199. US$13.80.

Lexis is a language text that targets intermediate ESL audiences as well as developmental English audiences. It integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking while aiming to provide the student with an active academic vocabulary that spans the general education curriculum. The authors feel that it is important to present vocabulary within a meaningful context. They accomplish their aim by presenting eight units of differing subject matter, such as "Language Change and the Development of American English," "Personal Computers: The Early Years," and "The Fickle Forces of Nature."

Each unit consists of a section called, "Establishing a Context" that presents the unit's theme and three following sections that emphasize three different levels of study: "Understanding Words," "Putting Words into Sentences," and "Using Words in Context." These levels are designed to help the student understand new vocabulary in context.

Establishing a Context—Each unit begins with a series of questions that help the student to focus on a specific theme. For example, Unit 5, called "The Story of Motion Pictures," begins with the questions:

-What makes a motion picture great? What great motion pictures can you name?

-In what ways does a motion picture differ from or resemble a novel?

-How have motion pictures changed since they were first invented? (p. 94)

Following the pre-reading questions in each unit is a "high-interest" article of 1500 to 2000 words that presents the new vocabulary in context. The article presented in Unit 5 leads the student through the history of motion picture progress, including such aspects as the various revolutions in technology that brought the motion picture industry to where it is today. To be sure that students understand what they read, they are asked next to identify as true or false a series of sentences that are related to the article.

Understanding Words—Approximately forty words are extracted from the text and presented as vocabulary. They are divided into lists according to their part of speech. These words are chosen on the basis of their frequency of occurrence in general education courses. Following are activities designed to teach the students the meaning of the vocabulary words within the context of the article. Exercises such as

selecting a vocabulary word from the list to match the definition and context of a particular sentence help the student to focus on each word and the possible meanings it may have. Other activities help students use decoding devices to help them understand new words they encounter and encoding devices to help them create new words from the ones they have already learned. Distinguishing between the verbs "adapt" and "adopt" is one of the decoding activities in Unit 5. Inflecting verbs for person and tense is an example of one of the encoding exercises.

Putting Words into Sentences—This section focuses on sentence-level activities with ten of the words from the vocabulary list. This step is important because words must occur in the context of a sentence to take on specific meaning. Activities help students to recognize related forms of the chosen lexical items as well as provide practice in such sentence-level formations as paraphrasing and passivization.

Using Words in Context—This is the culminating section of each chapter which now requires students to use their new vocabulary words in larger, more natural discourse. They are given a variety of oral and written exercises which focus on semantic, syntactic and rhetorical devices. One activity in Unit 5 requires that the students rearrange a series of scrambled sentences so that the story of Harry Houdini is understandable, progressing from start to finish, thus helping students not only practice their understanding of vocabulary, but also to fine-tune their skills in the use of rhetorical devices.

Lexis is a highly effective text for presenting academic vocabulary in an interesting way. In addition, the activities teach important skills that not only help the student retain the vocabulary, but also provide him with the necessary tools to expand his vocabulary. The authors recommend that this be the main text of a language course; I feel that it makes a fine supplement or can be used specifically with a vocabulary building course. The teacher need not worry about gathering materials and writing quizzes because all that is needed is included in the book. And the students will enjoy the articles and activities as they expand their active vocabulary.