Less grammar and more chunking? Implementing a lexico-grammar approach through tasks

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Recent usage-based theories in second language acquisition have stressed that there is no clear dividing line between grammar and lexis and that L2 learners should therefore be made aware of lexico-grammatical units such as chunks (Eskildsen 2009; Herbst 2017). In this context, grammar structures can be taught holistically as lexical chunks (cf. Selivan 2018) which students can use in task-based learning settings without analysing individual elements of the grammar structures. Especially in the secondary classroom, where grammar exercises often dominate other types of activities, chunks can consequently reduce the traditional grammar workload and leave more room for meaningful language use. However, there are hardly any empirical studies that investigate how lexico-grammar approaches can be integrated into a communicative classroom.

This presentation is based on findings of a PhD project in which five complex target-tasks were implemented in a class of the lower secondary level during a school year. Whenever possible, the grammar structures that were necessary to complete the tasks were presented as lexical chunks. The exploratory study particularly focuses on how the participants perceive the new TBLT setting and the integration of lexico-grammar as a focus on form. Semi-structured interviews with the teacher and her students (N=26, aged 12-14) were conducted prior, during and after the implementation of TBLT. These acceptance data were triangulated with written texts and interaction recordings to investigate how students use chunks to solve communicative tasks. The data analysis followed the sequential coding system advocated by grounded theory (Strauss/Corbin 1996). The research results suggest that chunks in TBLT settings challenge traditional teacher and student roles, and help learners to experience themselves as autonomous and competent.

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