

Putting Phrasal Verbs Into Perspective

Robert Wyss

Is there a more enigmatic lexical item in the English language than the multiword (phrasal) verb? Despite the many varied and creative attempts at circumventing their use, all ESL/EFL learners eventually arrive at the conclusion that incorporating English phrasal verbs, such as *run through*, *measure up*, and *take away*, into everyday verbal discourse represents an important step toward increasing their fluency in English.

The following lesson plan involves authentic texts in English and is therefore most suitable for intermediate to advanced learning levels. Magazine and newspaper articles on topics relevant to a given class will provide interesting reading material containing up-to-date language.

Learner Objectives

This activity will enable learners to

- adopt a strategy of deducing the meanings of multiword phrasal verbs in readings by examining the context in which they occur
- develop confidence that phrasal verbs can be learned and incorporated accurately into everyday English discourse
- understand two fundamental rules that characterize phrasal verbs

Lesson Plan: Phrasal Verbs in Context

1. Preparation (20 minutes): Select a medium-length article (1,000–1,500 words) from a newspaper or magazine that contains a number of multiword verbs and whose topic is likely to generate a lively postreading discussion.
2. Warm-up (5 minutes): Get the students warmed up by asking them questions such as, “What is a phrasal verb? Give me some examples.” Write their examples on the board. Offer some of your own if students get stuck. Next, ask the students to tell you the meanings of the verbs listed.
3. In-class reading assignment (10 minutes): Divide the class into small groups and distribute a copy of the article you selected in Step 1 to each student. Instruct the groups to read the article carefully, underline as many multiword verbs as they can, and guess their meanings. Circulate among the groups to monitor the students’ reading, helping them with difficult vocabulary when necessary.
4. Speed response (1–2 minutes): Elicit all the phrasal verbs the groups have identified in Step 2 in a speed response activity. Tell the students to call out, to-

gether as a class, all the multiword verbs they identified in the reading as fast as they can. Let the students know you are timing the activity: “O.K. You have 1 minute to tell me all the phrasal verbs you identified in the reading. One, two, three . . . Go!” List all elicited verbs on the board as fast as you can. This chaotic classroom activity helps lower students’ inhibitions and breaks the routine of using too many small-group exercises.

5. Examining meanings (10 minutes): Randomly ask students to tell you the meanings of the verbs, asking for sentence examples. Help students define verbs they are unfamiliar with. Only volunteer a meaning when it is clear that no one in the class knows it.
6. Defining literal versus idiomatic phrasal verbs (10 minutes): Explain that phrasal verbs can be either *literal* or *idiomatic*. A multiword verb is said to be literal if its meaning can be deduced by defining its individual parts. If it cannot, it is idiomatic. List examples of each type on the board or on an overhead transparency.

Example of a literal type: The guests came in.
(*came in* = literal meaning)

Example of an idiomatic type: The enemy gave up.
(*gave up* = surrendered)

Refer to the list of target verbs from the reading that you listed on the board in Step 2. Randomly ask students which category each of these verbs falls into and why.

7. Recognizing phrasal verbs of motion (5 minutes): Explain that phrasal verbs of motion tend to be literal. Offer students some examples (e.g., He went up to the top floor; The cat ran down the tree); then ask them to give you examples. Write their examples on the board.
8. Follow-up discussion (15 minutes): Initiate a follow-up discussion by asking students questions that encourage them to use the target verbs. For instance, after having students read a magazine article discussing the increase of unmarried Europeans and the tendency of men to go out less than women, I asked the class, “Why do you think single men tend to *stay in* more often than women?” By using target verbs from the reading in your questions (e.g., *stay in*, *go out*, *move into*), you prompt students to use them in their responses. For example, a student might answer, “The author says that men *stay in* more than women because men belong to fewer social organizations.” The idea is to keep the discussion moving while keeping the class focused on using the target verbs.

9. Out-of-class reading assignment: Select several more magazine or newspaper articles that contain at least six phrasal verbs. Assign each group from Step 3 a different article to read, and make copies of the articles for each student. Explain to students that they should read their articles outside of class and come to the next class session prepared to identify, define, and classify the phrasal verbs in their articles.
10. Wrap-up (30–45 minutes): In the next class session, have students form their groups from Step 3 and ask each group to create a list that (a) identifies the phrasal verbs from the reading assignment, (b) defines the verbs, (c) classifies the verbs (literal or idiomatic), and (d) explains how the group determined the classification type. Ask a student from each group to volunteer to act as the group spokesperson to share his or her group's findings with the class.

Conclusion

By identifying phrasal verbs in written contexts, deducing their meanings, and incorporating them into everyday verbal discourse, learners take important steps toward increasing their spoken fluency in English.

Recommended Resources

- McArthur, T., & Atkins, B. (1974). *Dictionary of phrasal verbs and their idioms*. New York: HarperCollins.
- The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge. (1997). *Cambridge international dictionary of phrasal verbs*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

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