

Let's Teach Phrasal Verbs¹

VINCENT L. CARRUBBA, FORMERLY UNIVERSITIES OF THE AMERICAS
AND TEPEYAC²

Importance

Phrasal verbs are encountered everywhere. They are the heart of informal speech and writing. They are also found in more formal contexts such as in *National Geographic Magazine*. Students and some non-native English teachers are at a loss in their comprehension of speech and reading because they ignore the function and meaning of phrasal verbs.

Very often teachers exclude them in their teaching of English and some textbooks give them very little importance, if any at all. Their meanings and different grammatical patterns need to be explained to students. A. Mackai's *Dictionary of American Idioms* and R. E. Feare's *Practice with Idioms* give excellent explanations of their meanings and Feare supplies plenty of practice. The patterns of phrasal verbs are complex due to the fact that they can be separable, inseparable, transitive, intransitive or a combination of these characteristics. Phrasal verbs are used in English because of their Germanic origin and their simplicity of form when compared to their formal equivalents: TURN OFF-extinguish, GET THROUGH TO-communicate successfully, etc. These verbs preserve the Anglo-Saxon flavor of English which differs greatly from their Greek and Latin equivalents: MAKE UP-reconcile, THROW AWAY-discard, SHOW UP-appear. An ineludible factor that we must keep in mind is that people who know English intimately use phrasal verbs all the time.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to make teachers aware of the importance of phrasal verbs for their own personal use and for teaching them effectively. Therefore, this article will describe a phrasal verb and its characteristics and will give several suggestions for practice.

¹ Paper presented at the Twenty-Third National MEXTESOL Convention, Zacatecas, 1996

² The author can be reached at Anaxágoras 153, Colonia Narvarte, 03020, México, D. F.

Description

A phrasal verb is a principal verb plus a particle: GIVE UP, TURN IN, MAKE OFF, etc. Both parts function as a unit or a single verb. A particle is a new part of speech different from prepositions or adverbs. A sentence may contain a particle, a preposition and an adverb, each with its distinct use: *John came up with another answer immediately*. The particle changes the meaning of the principle verb entirely: GET has a different meaning from the phrasal verb GET ON, TURN from TURN OFF and PUT from PUT AWAY. Furthermore, particles can change the meaning of the same principal verb: GET ON, GET OFF, GET DIT (OF), GET IN, GET AWAY (WITH), GET UP, GET OVER, GET BACK, and GET THROUGH (TO).

A phrasal verb is stressed on the particle as the above examples show. Some phrasal verbs are used with prepositions: GO IN FOR, DROP IN ON, LOOK UP TO. A striking contrast is the prepositional verb which is a principal verb plus a preposition. In this case the preposition goes with the following object: LISTEN TO THE MUSIC, THINK ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS, WRITE TO A FRIEND. Here the principal verbs are stressed as the examples show. The preposition does not change the meaning of the principle verb.

Special Characteristics

Common Particles

Particles such as UP, DOWN, OFF, ON, BACK, and OUT frequently combine with the principal verbs: BE, COME, GO, MAKE, GIVE, PUT. Other less commonly used particles are ALONG, OVER, and THROUGH. Prepositional verbs combine with WITH, TO, ON, ABOUT, OF or FOR. (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983; 266)

Five Word Order Patterns

The following five word order patterns are based on whether the phrasal verbs are separable. (*Turn the light on-Turn on the light*), inseparable (*He came back early*), transitive—always with objects (*turn off the TV*), intransitive—no object (*He caught on*) or some phrasal verbs combine these characteristics. Separable and transitive phrasal verbs permit nouns or pronouns between verb and particle, but only nouns after particles. These patterns needn't baffle the reader. They were thought of in order to facilitate learning. Each pattern begins with one, two or three sentences and then gives

other phrasal verbs and their meanings that fit the pattern. These are not exhaustive. There are many others that can be used in the same pattern.³

Teachers may choose to use one pattern as a unit of study and then go on to the next or they may choose one or two of the patterns depending on their particular groups, time or schedule.

PATTERN 1: SEPARABLE / TRANSITIVE (+ OBJECT)

I made out a check. I made one out. I made a check out.

TURN ON (cause to operate), TURN OFF (stop, extinguish), HAND IN (give by hand), DO OVER (repeat), LOOK UP (search for)

PATTERN 2, INSEPARABLE / TRANSITIVE (+ PREP + OBJECT)

We checked out of the hotel. We checked out of it.

LOOK DOWN ON (disapprove), BE IN ON (participate in), GO IN FOR (be interested in), GET THROUGH TO (communicate successfully), KEEPER WITH (maintain the same rate)

PATTERN 3, INSEPARABLE / TRANSITIVE (+ OBJECT)

We got on the bus. We got on it.

RUN INTO (meet accidentally), GO OVER (examine, review), GET OVER (recover from), GET IN (enter cars, taxis, elevators), GET OFF (leave, dismount, public transportation)

PATTERN 4, INSEPARABLE / INTRANSITIVE (NO OBJECT)

I came back last night.

BREAK DOWN (stop functioning), COME OVER (visit), FIGHT ON (understand, learn), FALL THROUGH (fail to materialize), SHOW UP (appear)

PATTERN 5, SEPARABLE / TRANSITIVE OR INSEPARABLE / INTRANSITIVE

I woke up my wife. I woke her up. I woke up.

MAKE OUT (distinguish, complete, succeed), MAKE UP (invent, fabricate, apply cosmetics, decide, reconcile), SHOW OFF (display proudly), TAKE OFF (remove, leave the ground), TAKE OVER (take control of, take charge or responsibility)

³ See Ferris's *Practice with Idioms* for additional verbs and his similar patterning.

Word Order of Questions and Relative Clauses

We come to an interesting contrast between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs. The latter can begin questions with prepositions: *To whom did you listen? At what hotel did Sara stay? For whom did you work?* The result of this word order is that the questions sound very formal. However, the particles of phrasal verbs cannot begin questions. It would be rather absurd to say, **Off what did he take? *Up with what will he not put?* The only alternative is to say, *What did he take off? or Did he take off his hat? What won't he put up with? or Won't he put up with that noise?*

In relative clauses, also known as adjective clauses, there is no separation of verb and particle: *The story (that) he made up. The sweater (that) she put on. The friends (who) we dropped in on.*

When to Split and Not to Split

Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1983) report that in long sentences there are two conditions in which the verb and the particle must not be separated: when the direct object following a phrasal verb has many syllables and when the direct object is grammatically complex: *the committee will ~~take~~ over the undesirability and inadequacy of the option. The president will ~~call~~ up the undersecretary of the interior.* With simple direct objects the verb and particle can be split: *The president will ~~take~~ the situation over. The president will ~~call~~ the first secretary up.*

In her talk on grammar at the National MEXTESOL Convention in Zacatecas in 1996, Diane Larsen-Freeman informed us that objects representing new information come after the particle. On the other hand, known information comes before the particle: *We ~~looked~~ up the internet development. We ~~looked~~ radar devices up.*

Literal and Completive Verbs

In some phrasal verbs the particles really mean what they say in the sense of position or direction: SET DOWN, STAND UP, TAKE DOWN, LANG UP, HAND OUT. There are also completive phrasal verbs in which the particle indicates completed action: EAT UP, DRINK UP, TEAR UP, HEAT UP. The particle may be left out, but the meaning doesn't change. *I ate the ice cream. I ate up the ice cream.* (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983: 274)

Phrasal Verbs, Nouns and Adjectives

Phrasal nouns and adjectives are derived from phrasal verbs due to the flexibility of the English language.

PHRASAL VERB	→ PHRASAL NOUN	→ PHRASAL ADJECTIVE
PICK UP	A PICKLE	A TICKLE-TRICK

We can see that a phrasal noun is formed by the addition of a determiner before it. A phrasal adjective is formed by the determiner, the base form and a noun. Plural adjectives and nouns can occur without determiners: PICKUPS, PICKUPTRUCKS. The base form of the noun or adjective (PICKUP) can be joined or hyphenated, depending on how commonly used the word is. Since PICKUP is very commonly used, it is joined. The stress changes from the particle in the verb to the word PICK in the noun. The adjective bears a secondary accent on the word TICK and a primary on the word TRUCK. Examples of other phrasal nouns are BREAKTHROUGH, WORKOUT, COMEBACK, KICKOFF, DRIVE-IN, RIP-OFF, TAKE OFF, BLOWUP, GIVEAWAY. Other phrasal adjectives are: CAST-OFF CLOTHES, A POP-UP BOOK, ROLL-ON DEODORANT, SLIP-ON SHOES, SHOOT-DOWN CRIMES, A HOPPE-CALL.

Interesting notes containing phrasal nouns have appeared in *National Geographic* and *Time* magazines. One note said that 150,000 birds (eared grebes) died on the shores of the Salton Sea, a lake in southeastern California. This was the biggest *z* ever recorded for this species due to the fact that the lake collects pesticides and fertilizers from agricultural RUNOFF. (*National Geographic*, Jan. 1993). In *Time* (June 3 1996) a picture appeared of Yeltzin kissing a military man, which is common in Russia. The title of this note was "Giving the big KISS-OFF", implying that Yeltzin would probably fire the military officer.

Suggestions for Practice

Meaning through Observation, Practice and Definition Correspondence

Use short dialogs or short narrations around a common theme or activity. This facilitates meaning because of context. Encourage students to guess at meaning at this point.

Illustrative Dialogs

At Home

- Paul:* Why don't you turn the TV on?
Bob: OK. What channel?
Paul: Channel 11.
Bob: Oh, no. That's too loud.
Paul: All right. I'll turn it down.
Bob: Oh, no. I can't hear a thing.
Paul: My, you're hard to please! I'll turn it up.
Bob: Thanks. That's a lot better.
Paul: Don't forget to turn off the TV when you go to bed.

What should I wear?

- Wife:* How do you like this dress?
Husband: The colors are too loud. Take it off.
Wife: Well, then, which dress should I put on?
Husband: Put on the black one with the white collar.
Wife: Oh, no. That's too conservative. From now on I'll wear whatever dress I want to and never ask you again!

After the students practice the dialog and guess at the meaning of the phrasal verbs, go through the actions of turning on and off the lights of the classroom, of putting on and taking off a sweater or jacket. Then begin the analysis of these verbs: stress, separable and transitive, pronoun use; also definition correspondence can begin at this point: TURN ON means making the TV work; turn off means making it stop working. Also ask questions of definition correspondence: *Did Paul make the TV work? Yes, he turned it on. Did he lower the volume. Yes, he turned it down.* All of this takes place within the context of the above dialogs. (Feare 1980: 4-6, 16-18).

Rhythm and Stress

Have the students repeat groups of short sentences to emphasize the stressed words. Use a dialog or a short narration.

Charley's Activities

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| When did Charley wake up? | He woke up at six forty five. |
| When did he get up? | He got up at seven. |
| Who did he call up? | He called his girlfriend up. |
| When did she come over? | She came over at nine. |
| He called up his girlfriend. | He called her up. |
| He turned on the television. | He turned it on. |
| He turned off the television. | He turned it off. |

Flash Cards and Word Order Cards

Write an incomplete sentence on the board. Show flash cards and have students pick out the right card for the missing word.

I want to watch TV. I'm going to turn it _____. ON OFF UP DOWN

I don't want to watch TV anymore. Please turn it _____. UP OFF ON DOWN

He _____ his girlfriend up. TURNED PUT LOOK CALLED

His girlfriend came _____. UP ON OFF OVER

Use moveable word order cards. Give a team of two or three students several cards that make up a sentence. Have them put the cards in correct order on the board or wall. Provide Scotch tape.

SWEATER THIS JANE AFTERNOON TOOK HER OFF

COMING AT NIGHT GEORGE 9PM OVER IS TOMORROW

Small Group Activity

Practice short, open-ended or incomplete dialogs. Use the appropriate form of the following phrasal verbs: COME BACK, WAKE UP, GET OVER, GET BACK.

A: I woke up at 7:30 this morning. What time _____?
B: I _____.

A: You had a bad cold yesterday. Are you feeling better today?
B: Yes, _____.

A: Is John still out of town?

B: Yes, _____ or No, _____.

(We assume that the students have practiced these verbs in a previous lesson.)

Use role plays. In the following role plays, the participants take the parts of friends conversing about trips or clothing.

A: Ask your friend about his trip to Puerto Escondido. Talk about plane, bus or taxi transportation. Use these phrasal verbs: GET ON, OFF, IN, OUT OF. Use different question words.

B: Ask your friend about the clothing he/she just bought at Liverpool's. Use the phrasal verbs: PUT ON, TAKE OFF, TRY ON, MAKE OUT A CHECK. Also use a CREDIT CARD. Use the words PANTS, DRESS, COAT, JACKET, SHIRT, SWEATER, SKIRT, TIE, etc.

Questions and Answers

Have students ask and answer questions based on a dialog or narration with no questions in it.

<i>Jean:</i>	I'm going to put on a white blouse and a black skirt today.
<i>Bob:</i>	I'm going to wear a blue shirt, a red tie and gray pants. I think I'll put on a sweater too.
<i>Jean:</i>	That's a good idea. You can take your sweater off if it gets too warm.

Corrections

Have students correct the following mistakes that are often made:

Can you get through the message to him?
Alice made quickly up the story that she told the children.
The situations up which Mr. Jones put with were unpleasant.
She got the measles over quickly.
Phil gets murder away with all the time.

Listening, Reporting, Reading, Writing

Have students listen for phrasal verbs on TV or radio programs and report in class what they heard. One or two verbs would be enough to expect. Ask for the situations or contexts they were used in.

Ask students to underline phrasal verbs in newspaper or magazine articles. They can talk about meanings, situations or contexts to their classmates.

Suggest writing letters to friends or relatives. The students can use the phrasal verbs they know or have learned in class. These can also be read in class and collected afterwards if the teacher wishes.

Conclusion

In this article comments were made on phrasal verb characteristics and suggestions given for practice. Much more must be done to make the student feel at home with his use of these verbs for communication purposes. It is up to the teacher to study them and to create his own materials. This writing and the following references are a push in that direction.

References

- Allsop, J. 1990. *Test your Phrasal Verbs*. Penguin English.
- Carrubba, V. L. 1991. *The Teacher, the Student and EFL*. Forthcoming.
- Celce-Murcia, M. and D. Larsen-Freeman. 1983. *The Grammar Book*. Newbury House.
- Dainty, P. 1991. *Phrasal Verbs in Context*. MacMillan.
- Dixson, R. J. 1951. *Essential Idioms in English*. Regents.
- Feare, R. L. 1981. *Practice with Idioms*. Oxford.
- Krohn, R. 1971. *English Sentence Patterns*. University of Michigan.
- Makkai, A. 1987. *A Dictionary of American Idioms*. Barron's Educational Series.
- Thomson, A. J. and A. V. Martinet. 1969. *A Practical English Grammar*. Oxford.
- Whitford, G. C. and R. J. Dixson. 1953. *Handbook of American Idioms & Idiomatic Usage*. Simon & Schuster.