



TEACHING PHRASAL VERBS IN ENGLISH CLASSES

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching phrasal verbs is an inevitable step as students gain proficiency and aim for a more natural speaking style. Native speakers use phrasal verbs frequently and it is likely that your students will have already asked about the meaning of common phrasal verbs, such as *get out*, *fall off* and *break down*, even before you make them a specific lesson topic.

Phrasal verbs are often confusing for students, due to their idiomatic nature. Unfortunately, there is no quick formula for students to learn and understand them. There is no one rule for determining which preposition to use after the verb. Each phrase has to be learned and understood individually.

So what is the best way for students to learn phrasal verbs? First, students need to understand that phrasal verbs cannot be accurately translated because of their idiomatic nature and the fact that they are compound phrases. Phrasal verbs sound quite strange to non-native speakers of English. However, once the student can understand the nature of phrasal verbs, they usually have an easier time using them.

As a teacher, the best practice for teaching phrasal verbs is to introduce only the most widely used ones and disregard obscure phrasal verbs that have become archaic or are rarely used. During a typical class, introducing 5-8 phrasal verbs at a time to students is productive. Choose a small selection that falls into a logical group, either because they are paired with the same preposition, or they fit into the same topic. After understanding the basic meaning of each phrasal verb, they should be practiced in a natural way through conversation. Such conversation should be encouraged through role play and dialogues. Students will greatly improve their English language ability, if they can utilize phrasal verbs.

1.1 How do you teach phrasal verbs? Introducing phrasal verbs to your class

Simply put, a phrasal verb is a verb whose meaning changes when it's accompanied by a preposition or an adverb. You can find a more in-depth



explanation of what a phrasal verb is [here](#), which is perfect for helping explain it to first-time learners, and [here's](#) an extensive list of different phrasal verbs.

Plus, if you are searching for a basic breakdown of phrasal verbs (with famous movie scenes) to show your students, show them the video below! The lesson is from the [FluentU English YouTube channel](#), which is a goldmine for both students and teachers alike! If you love teaching with native materials and are looking for a resource to get your students excited about their English, then be sure to [subscribe to the channel](#) for more great content. You've been seeing phrasal verbs for years, so the first time you introduce them to a beginner, you may be surprised at how large and difficult it is to intuit the difference between the verb to bring and the phrasal verb to bring up, for example.

Prepositions are some of the hardest words to intuit for foreign language learners, so when a preposition changes the meaning of an already familiar verb, it can seem like public enemy number one as far as your students are concerned. Luckily, you have the power to change that. The following methods are some that I've tried over the years. The third method is my favorite because my students seem to catch on and retain phrasal verbs better with it.

1. From a list

A lot of textbooks/classes will have a list of phrasal verbs that are relevant to the course, such as Business English, TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, etc. A long list like this can be overwhelming to students, so consider presenting five phrasal verbs a day or using fun vocabulary activities such as cutting up the phrasal verbs and their definitions and having students match them up. See my posts [4 Ways to Teach New Vocabulary](#) and [4 Activities for Reviewing Vocabulary](#) for more ideas.

2. In context

A fun way to teach phrasal verbs is in the context of a story. Seeing the phrasal verb in context helps students grasp and retain the meaning. I've seen some textbooks dedicated to idioms that are grouped into themes, and a lot of them include phrasal verbs. At ESL Library, we have three sections (a detective series, a love story, and a story about college life) that make learning phrasal verbs and idioms fun and relevant. Try our [Detective Series – The Case of the Missing Ring](#), [Everyday Idioms](#), and [Everyday Idioms \(Part 2\)](#) lessons. [Everyday Idioms \(Part 3\)](#) is coming soon, too!

3. As groupings

Grouping phrasal verbs into categories based on the same verb is another way to go. This is my preferred method because it presents phrasal verbs in small, logical, and manageable groups. I think students remember the phrasal verbs more easily this way. Here are some common groupings to try with your students:



Teachers and materials writers make use of various approaches to selecting and grouping phrasal verbs for teaching purposes. These approaches are also reflected in the strategies learners use for learning phrasal verbs, associating them with each other, remembering them and/or writing them in their vocabulary notebooks. R. Gairns and S. Redman are critical of the principle of grouping phrasal verbs formed from the same verb, since the items are likely to be unrelated in meaning, and not memorable for learners.

This is clearly a danger to be aware of. However, such is not always the case. Often there is a basic relationship of meaning shared by phrasal verbs of a common verb. The 'focus on the verb' approach can be used to provide data for learners to look for common features of meaning in groups of phrasal verbs. In a given group they should be able to see how the basic physical meaning of the verb is extended metaphorically by the preposition.

Gairns and Redman have the same reservations about using the preposition as an organizing principle. The use of different verbs indeed changes the meaning of a preposition. They also note, however, that if the preposition "does perform a more consistent function with regard to its effect on the meaning of the root verb e.g. 'up' adding a sense of completion [...] then the approach is clearly more valid. The implication is that, when grouping according to prepositions, it may be necessary to subdivide the phrasal verbs of a prepositional group according to a closer or shared meaning. Focusing on individual uses of prepositions, and then perhaps at a later stage mixing different uses for comparison and contrast, can encourage learners to look for and identify systematic features of meaning in the way prepositions are used. Gairns and Redman consider a third approach to be grouping by a contextual link. Such a link "often allows the teacher better opportunities for further practice and possibly makes the verbs more memorable for the students" but can lead to "the inclusion of verbs which are either of little practical use or are inappropriate to the level". The fourth approach is to gather together different meanings of one verb. Gairns and Redman consider that this approach "is perhaps best suited for revision purposes with more advanced students." 7 At lower levels, the different meanings are unlikely to be equally useful.

II. Why implement games for teaching phrasal verbs

Have your students write sentences with a phrasal verb you give them. Once you've introduced students to phrasal verbs, design activities where the class uses the verbs in their own sentences. Write a phrasal verb on the board. Then give the students time to write 1 or more sentences using that phrasal verb properly. For a participatory activity, have students read their sentences aloud to the class. Ask the class to decide if students have used the verbs correctly or not. You can also make this an individual assignment that



students will hand in. You can then grade everyone's sentences to see if your point is getting across.

Ask students to define a phrasal verb without using the phrase. For another class activity, tell one student a phrasal verb. Then have them go to the front of the room and define that phrase without using the two words. Let the class guess which phrasal verb they are describing. If you assign a student "break up" for their phrasal verb, they could say "when you decide to leave a relationship with your boyfriend." This should tip the class off that the student is describing a break-up.

Replace the phrasal verb in a sentence with another word as a quiz. This activity may sound strange at first, but it trains students to use context clues to figure out phrasal verbs. Write a sentence on the board or say it out loud, but replace the phrasal verb with a random noun, like "apple." If you've constructed a sentence with enough context clues, the students should be able to tell what the phrasal verb was. For example, if you say "I apple a story that wasn't true," the context clues should tell the students that the phrasal verb in this sentence is "made up." Do this for several sentences to make your point. Once students get good at this, ask for volunteers to do the same. The class will have fun with this activity.

Make students differentiate between phrasal verbs and verb + preposition combinations. Once the students get proficient at picking out phrasal verbs for themselves, advance the activities to differentiating between phrasal verbs and plain verb + preposition combinations. Once they can accurately choose between the two for themselves, then they are very well-versed in what phrasal verbs are. Remind the students that for something to be a phrasal verb, the phrase must mean something different from the two words individually. As an activity, give the students a worksheet of some sentences that use phrasal verbs and some that use plain verb + preposition combinations. They have to use clues from the sentence to figure out which is which.

Test students on picking out phrasal verbs themselves. Once you've done guided activities explaining and identifying phrasal verbs, let the students choose them for themselves. Use handouts, worksheets, or other activities where the students have to identify the phrasal verbs in sentences. Do a few guided group activities first so students get used to identifying phrasal verbs. Then move on to individual activities. Consider making this activity ungraded at first so the students can learn without getting discouraged. Then give a graded quiz or test when you've taught the subject completely.

CONCLUSION

If you supply real company names and real examples, so much the better, particularly if you're teaching English to business students. They'll really



appreciate the examples and will easily understand the phrasal verb and how it's used. Follow up by asking them the meaning of "take over", in this case. Can they supply other examples of companies that were taken over recently?

Do the same with "go under". Supply an example of a company that has filed for bankruptcy. Have any of your students heard about another company that has gone under recently? From such examples the students may figure out the definition for themselves, or if they are having a bit of trouble with it, help them guess. Give them lots of examples. Use the names of real companies, people and places. Above all, help them understand the phrasal verb, beyond the mere memorization of a definition. Don't forget this essential clarification: students must understand that phrasal verbs are more informal and are thus used more often in spoken rather than written English, although they may be used in informal, written communication like emails to family or friends.

There are a number of ways in which students can practice their new phrasal verbs. Worksheets are a standard, traditional option. One worksheet may emphasize phrasal verbs using the preposition "up", while another stresses the use of "on" or "in". These may be downloaded from the internet, or the teacher could write his or her own worksheet. Whether the exercise is "fill in the blanks" or "matching", give your students plenty of practice.

Short videos, such as are found on Youtube and easily downloaded to a hard drive of a computer, may also be used to teach students to recognized phrasal verbs, as they are being used in ordinary conversations. A worksheet may be written to go along with the video, or students may list the phrasal verbs that they were able to catch, and discussion may follow. Games, such as "Bingo", "Tic Tac Toe, or a board game of your own design, may also be effective. Just give the students the synonym, for example, "postpone" and ask them to come up with the right phrasal verb, in this case, "put off".

The goal for the teacher is to help students go from very controlled activities or exercises to using the new phrasal verbs on their own. Here are a couple of activities that may help. Give every pair of students 2-3 phrasal verbs that they must use in a conversation. The students must come up with a dialogue, put it down on paper, and then act it out in front of the class.

To summarize, phrasal verbs are essentially idioms, and they need to be learned as idioms, a few at a time. They need to be presented and practiced in real or simulated circumstances. The most important task for the teacher is to group the phrasal verbs systematically, so that by means of association they can be more easily remembered. Above all, have a good time with your students and enjoy some laughs. These phrases are often quite colorful and interesting, especially to those who speak a native language other than English.



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