Challenges of Phrasal Verbs to Ecology and Environmental Protection Students

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs have always posed a significant challenge for those involved in the English language learning and teaching processes. This might be due to the fact that they are so many as there are numerous possibilities of recombining the lexical items that already exist in English.

Phrasal verbs are idiomatic expressions that have special meanings, which can be sometimes challenging. The present paper aims to provide some theoretical aspects regarding phrasal verbs, including various classifications and syntactic patterns focusing on those frequently used in the selected field. It also aims at identifying the main problems students may face when they try to use phrasal verbs in their own speech or when they encounter them in various texts, which are specific to their area of specialty.

Keywords: phrasal verbs, literal/idiomatic meanings, syntactic patterns

Introduction
Since the world we live in is constantly changing, new concepts are constantly coming forth and developing in science and technology, new economic conditions are emerging, etc., and they are all part of the challenges that exercise a great impact upon our lives. At the same time, teaching English as a second language has also evolved nearly at the same pace. The increasing demand for English courses designed for groups of learners with specific needs has been justified by the fact that language varies significantly from one context or field of interest to another.

In the specialist literature on teaching English as a second language, there has been an increased interest in modernizing the teaching process. The search for new, fashionable and at the same time effective techniques of teaching English in general and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in particular, has never ceased.

Non-native students of English need to be taught how to deal with this flux of information in order to develop their abilities required

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for effective communication in occupational settings. This is why teachers should be innovative enough to provide updated information as well as teaching techniques and evaluating methods.

ESP teachers have a more difficult task as their students are familiar with or even advanced in English (basic grammar rules and vocabulary) and they need to focus on acquiring the field-specific vocabulary and specific grammatical features.

English for Ecology and Environment Protection

Linguists promoted the idea of training students as researchers, as an effective approach to help those students improve and develop their knowledge and skills in elaborating texts. Thus, the teacher's and the learner's roles are equally important and should be taken into account in order to identify relevant concepts and topics related to the specific discipline they are interested in, specifying clearly the course's objectives, analyzing the students' needs, developing a coherent course and establishing a sequence of learning, focusing on appropriate tasks and teaching methods, monitoring and assessing the students' progress and providing effective intervention.

English for Ecology and Environment Protection, as most ESP courses, is task-based and it displays some characteristic features, such as complex syntactic structures, frequent use of complex noun phrases, longer sentences, frequent use of the passive voice, specific vocabulary, etc.

Being a normal part of every-day English, phrasal verbs should be introduced in short contexts thus enabling students to analyze their syntactic behavior. Since most ecology and environmental protection related issues are published in journals or posted on the internet, phrasal verbs have a high frequency although they have a Latinate one-verb equivalent, for instance it is easier to say *Trees are cut down* instead of *Trees are felled..*

Phrasal Verbs used in Ecology and Environmental Protection

Phrasal verbs are very common in English. Some linguists use a broader term for this category of verbs, i.e. 'multi-word verbs', being regarded as a highly productive system (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990, Foley & Hall 2003).

Some linguists argue that these verbs are mainly used in spoken English or slang as single-word equivalents are believed to be more appropriate than phrasal verbs. Some others believe that this is a

misconception as evidence shows that they are used in formal texts. Thus, there are certain phrasal verbs which are used in formal English (McCarthy & O'Dell 2008:20) such as: *go through* (=check), *put forward* (=present), *point out* (=observe). Their register may vary from formal to informal. Their frequency of occurrence is higher in informal English, but studies have shown that phrasal verbs are to be found in formal texts as they sound more natural.

Specialized dictionaries provide formal expressions such as *impinge on* (=encroach, invade another's property or business) or *yield up* (=disclose).

In this respect, Bryan Fletcher (2005) provides a list of phrasal verbs that are frequently used in all registers, including in formal and technical, suggested by *The Macmillan Defining Vocabulary*, which includes 16 phrasal verbs in the list of the 2,500 English words that are used for writing the definitions in Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus: consist of, get up (= get out of bed), grow up, leave out, make up (= invent), put down (= put something on the floor etc), slow down, take off (= remove clothes), deal with, give up, happen to, look for, pick up, put on (= get dressed), stick out, wake up.

The simplest form to describe a phrasal verb is to define its structure from a lexical perspective indicating that it is made up of a verb and one or two particles (Flower 2002: 7). The particle can be a preposition or an adverb. There are not too many adverbs and prepositions in English, but there are endless possibilities to combine them. The resulting combination may have meanings which are different from that of the original single-word verbs. In this respect Palmer (1974) notes that phrasal verbs vary in their degree of idiomaticity.

Various attempts have been made so far to classify phrasal verbs. The traditional linguistics provides a classification of phrasal verbs which focuses only on the particle alone:

- prepositional verbs (basic verb + preposition), e.g. *frown upon* = disapprove:
    Our society frowns upon waste in general.
- adverbial verbs (basic verb + adverb), e.g. *leave off* =stop doing:
    Tomorrow morning the conflict will take up from where it left off.
- adverbial-prepositional verbs (basic verb + adverb + preposition), e.g. *to put up with* = endure:
    We also had to put up with the appalling weather.

The *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1989) provides four types of combinations of verbs with particles:

- combinations where the meaning of the whole cannot be understood by knowing the meaning of the individual verbs and particles, for instance *put off* (=postpone);
    > *They had to put off the matter till the next meeting.*

- combinations where the verb is always used with a particular preposition or adverb, e.g. *rely on* (=depend on, count on):
    > *In most of the cases, environmentalists rely on personal observations.*

- combinations where the particle does not change the meaning of the verb, but is used to suggest that the action described by the verb is performed thoroughly, completely or continuously, an example in case is *spread out* (=expand, proliferate) as in:
    > *Sunlight is more intense at the Equator than at the poles, creating a marked difference in temperature, which causes energy to spread out from the hotter Equator towards the colder higher latitudes.*

- combinations where the verb and the particle both have meanings which may be found in another combination and uses, but they occur together, for instance *fight back* (=defend) as in:
    > *In 1970, as the oil companies were poised to start construction on the pipeline, the environmentalists fought back, invoking the new environmental protection law.*

If the phrasal verbs transitivity or intransitivity, separability or inseparability is taken into consideration, then the following categories of phrasal verbs have been advanced:

- intransitive verbs – do not have an object, for instance *level off* (= stop changing or developing, stabilize). Their pattern includes a verb and an adverb, which usually cannot be separated from the verb;
    > *The project draft will be leveled off by the end of next week.*

- transitive inseparable verbs - (they can take an object but the verb cannot be separated by its particle), e.g. *come into* (= inherit money or property);
    > *The foundation will come into its properties when the Court decides it.*

- transitive separable verbs (they can be separated by the object which can be placed between the verb and the particle or after the verb), e.g. *bring forward* (= propose for discussion);
    > *The symposium organizing committee has decided that the issue of carbon dioxide will be brought forward.*
- three-part transitive inseparable (phrasal-prepositional verbs), for example *make up for* (= compensate), *cut down on* (=reduce);
    > *The victims of the landslides will be compensated for by their insurance company.*
- ergative verbs – can be either transitive or intransitive. The pattern of intransitive ergative verbs includes a verb + an adverb. Thus *give in* – when it is intransitive it has the following pattern: verb + adverb; its basic meaning is surrender, for instance:
    When it is transitive, its basic meaning is *hand in* and its pattern may involve: verb + adverb + noun; verb + noun + adverb; verb + pronoun + adverb.
    > *After the conflict neither the environmentalists nor the workers gave in.*
- ditransitive verbs – this type can have two objects, a direct object and an indirect object, for example - *hand in* (=submit a document, petition, resignation, etc. to a person in authority).
    > *The participants in the manifestation handed in their petition to the mayor.*

Over the last years linguists have showed interest in phrasal verbs, compiling them in books or dictionaries for specialized fields. Bolinger (1971) notes that phrasal verbs are even more expressive than the synonyms they replace.

In order to raise students' awareness, phrasal verbs should be studied in context and not isolated in lists. Thus students will also be able to learn the collocational patterns in which they occur.

My Ecology and Environmental Protection students (1st year of study) admitted it was difficult to learn phrasal verbs through the normal acquisition process as there are no such combinations in their native language. However, they were familiar with certain phrasal verbs and prefer to use them instead of the single-verb that has almost the same meaning, for instance: *burn down* (=destroy by fire) in Stop *burning down* forests to create farmland.

Nevertheless, there are phrasal verbs that are polysemous or that have more idiomatic meanings, i.e. the meaning of the phrasal verb cannot be deduced from its elements, such as *touch off in* the text below:

> The accident *touched off* a battle between the native Alaskans and the oil industry over both the culpability for the accident and the future of the region's oil transportation and oil spill readiness. Exxon led the clean-up effort with 11,000 workers in the summer months and expended approximately 1.9 billion dollars. Sea otter rehabilitation centers were *set up* while salmon and herring fisheries were isolated and closely monitored. Scientists are still attempting to determine the ecological damage *brought about* by the spill.
> (adapted from
> http://www1.american.edu/ted/projects/tedcross/xseap17.htm)

Under these circumstances, it is the teacher's challenging task to provide those phrasal verbs that have idiomatic meanings in proper contexts. Since there are no rules to explain how to form phrasal verbs correctly, an easy way to understand the meaning of a specific phrasal verb is to look it up in a dictionary and to check its meaning. Since nowadays most students are internet savvy, it would be better to encourage them to use concordancers – a helpful tool which can be used to access authentic language. Thus, the uses and collocations of a certain verb are displayed, providing examples from particular contexts.

As in the case of collocations, phrasal verbs should not be delivered isolated semantically, in lists but in specialized, authentic texts, pointing out their syntactic environment as well as the words they tend to combine with.

Conclusions

Phrasal verbs can be challenging to ESP students in general, as they have different meanings (sometimes unpredictable and idiosyncratic) and various syntactic patterns. Students tend to avoid phrasal verbs as they cannot grasp their idiomatic meanings. However, this drawback can be overcome by making students aware of their presence and use, encouraging them to use phrasal verbs in appropriate contexts instead of Latinized verbs just to sound natural in English and to avoid the risk of sounding ridiculous or presumptuous to native speakers.

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