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- Jigsaw activities ■ Numeracy ■ Networking Lesson Study ■ Intercultural competence

- Alastair Lane ■ Chia Suan Chong ■ Rebecca Vane ■ Scott Granville ■ Fiona Dunlop
- Andrew Boon ■ Anna Hasper ■ Alison Shepherd ■ George Murdoch



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Putting the ‘oomph’ back into phrasal verbs

Biljana Naumoska describes teaching, practising and revising this kind of verb.

I have been teaching for over 15 years, in fact it would be more correct to use the ‘closer to 20 years’ time frame (yikes! time really does fly!), and in that time I have had the opportunity to work with EFL learners from all walks of life, as they say, from both private and state institutions of education, from all stages in the age spectrum (from young learners to more mature learners), and if there has been any unanimous agreement in terms of acquiring any particular structure – then this would have to be the learners’ unequivocal dislike (if I want to be gentle about it, though the term ‘hatred’ can also be used) for phrasal verbs, in any shape, form or use.

I, on the other hand, love them; I love using them, and I love teaching them – in fact, since I am aware of how despised they are, I find myself especially motivated to bring them closer to the learners, and make them see just how wonderful phrasal verbs can be; are, in fact. I am absolutely sincere in this claim; maybe it is because I am looking at things from a teacher’s perspective (which is perfectly understandable, since I am a teacher), or maybe I am just a bit ‘odd’ ... but, then, we all have our little quirks that make us special, don’t we?!

In any case, I really do feel that phrasal verbs have been given a bum rap, undeservedly so bearing in mind their usefulness. There are so many things that can be covered by practising them, and, yet, they tend to be so under- and unappreciated.

Most of my teaching career has been at a state institution of higher education,

which means that the majority of EFL learners that I have had the pleasure of working with have been students – from freshmen to seniors, all of them fully cognisant that, as English majors, phrasal verbs constitute one of the more significant segments of the English language. I might be biased, here, since I am speaking from the perspective of an instructor in Modern English, and, as I previously said earlier, as a great fan of phrasal verbs and all of their uses.

I am a great believer in involving the learners in choosing what they might want to cover in a particular class, as much as this is possible, of course. The fact that I teach in higher education affords me this opportunity much more than at any other level of education, where there are numerous restrictions in terms of what needs to be covered and in the (more often than not, extremely short) time frame it needs to be completed. So, wherever possible I like to give the learners a choice in terms of what we will be looking at in more detail in that particular class – whether the focus will be of a grammatical nature, or whether we will be doing vocabulary building (via reading, for example), improving listening or speaking skills, among others.

There are several points that I would like to clarify here, however. One, bear in mind that despite my best intentions to accommodate to the learners’ wants, this is not always possible, or even necessary – there are times when we need to finish what we have previously started, or when we need to get some formal type of assessment done, for

instance. Two, the practice of the above-mentioned skills are certainly not mutually-exclusive; in fact, they are always interconnected, and being dealt with on their own would certainly make for a very dull and unappealing class – for all parties involved, instructor and learners. And, three, the opportunity I am so fond of giving the learners to decide for themselves, as mature adults, in terms of what we will focus on in a particular class, or even just a segment of a class, is not fully open in the sense – ‘So, what do you guys feel like doing today?’ but is limited, in the sense of ‘Here are some options for today’s class – which of these do you feel more inclined to look at in more detail?’ Certainly, they are not just randomly given options; those very options are always connected to the course curriculum, despite the ease with which they are presented to the learners. My feeling is that by involving the learners to have these options, and make choices in the learning process, allows them to perceive themselves as proactive participants in the learning context, in the classroom, and, as such, to also assume responsibility for their learning, thus promoting learner autonomy.

Going back to me being a believer in allowing learners to choose what we will be focusing on in more detail, and respecting their choices, as much as possible (no, we cannot ‘practise speaking’ or ‘practise making *wh*-questions’ by asking the instructor to tell us, in minute detail, how it was for them when they were a student), I must sadly admit that never in my teaching career, never, not once, I repeat, have any of my learners opted for phrasal

verbs as their choice of that class's focus. I think that there were even some instances, when I was particularly exasperated, I admit, that between a spelling bee/grammar test/verb tenses practice, they opted for those than the lovely phrasal verb exercises and activities I had prepared.

The only explanation I can think of for this aversion to phrasal verbs must stem from some point in the learners' educational past – the way in which they did phrasal verbs in high school, or even at a later stage in primary school, must have been by having to memorise them in lists, and this is what is most likely causing them to 'shy away' from them now. The thing is, however, their fervent dislike of phrasal verbs will also be reflected when they, themselves, become teachers, and their students will pick up on it, and, more likely than not, accept it, and thus, the cycle goes on.

The learners' dislike for phrasal verbs is so severe that I even took to avoiding the actual use of the term 'phrasal verbs', replacing it with 'two/three/multiple part verbs', but they soon caught on! In fact, it is frequent practice that I squeeze phrasal verb practice in as covertly as possible, in a sneaky manner worthy of an FBI agent. Thus, in a reading, we might be looking at various synonyms, and I might ask them to think of more informal words for a certain word and, more often than not, a phrasal verb will be mentioned. Or, in the context of a spelling bee, once they have been asked to spell a particularly challenging or tricky word, they might be then asked to provide a more informal variant, where, once again, a phrasal verb inevitably makes an appearance.

I have asked the learners on numerous occasions what it is about phrasal verbs that makes them so loathsome to them. Their most common answer is something along the lines that they are very hard to learn, and the fact that they have so many potential meanings that depend on the context of the sentence they are used in, is what makes them so. I can understand them, actually.

The English language has so many idiosyncratic moments (such as *How can noses run and feet smell?*; *How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same while a wise man and a wise guy are not?*; *How can a form be filled out as it is filled in?*; *How can your house burn down as it burns up?*; *How can an alarm clock go on by going off?*; *Why is it that when the lights are out we cannot see them, but when the stars are out we can*, among others), that phrasal verbs really do seem to be the cherry on top, ironically speaking. But, I strongly feel that once they move past that, they, too, will learn to appreciate all the things that phrasal verbs have going for them.

Acquiring, practising and revising phrasal verbs can be incorporated in a multitude of ways and activities, excluding the 'drilling' method, of course. Phrasal verbs, for example, can be included when dealing with writing – they may be a great way to introduce and deal with the issue of register, and its importance. This can then develop to discussing differences in written versus oral communication. In terms of vocabulary building, phrasal verbs are a great way to revise and build up EFL learners' vocabulary, and, as such, to improve their speaking/communication skills in the long run. It goes without saying that people are more receptive to communicating when they have a large word stock, and they feel comfortable enough to use those words, and play around with them. Obviously, the advantages that phrasal verbs offer in terms of improving the EFL learners' proficiency are numerous and should, as such, be presented to the learners themselves. Pragmatically speaking, if nothing else, once learners are aware of phrasal verbs' importance in the context of improving their EL proficiency, they will, if nothing else, learn to tolerate them.

In conclusion, here is just a sample of how we spent some quality class time covering phrasal verbs recently (this was done with seniors, EFL majors). First we did a reading text, where we discussed various points that arose from it – in this way we were able to do a reading comprehension check, to

see if they had gotten the idea of the text, of what it was about. Then, they were asked to summarise it in about 50–60 words, which was no small feat since the reading was at least one page long. They then swapped summaries and were asked to read and comment on their peers' work (bonus points, managed to get in some peer review, too!), and make constructive feedback. As a follow-up, they were asked to summarise their peers' summaries, in their own words. Without any particular instruction, the learners used a number of phrasal verbs in the second set of summaries, and this was a great opening to look at the various meanings of the phrasal verbs that had cropped up. Finally, they were asked to work together in pairs, or groups of three, to illustrate a verb of their choice – in terms of other words it collocates with, as well as other prepositions it can pair up with, and provide examples. This was illustrated by clusters, to make it more clear, and finally, they presented it to the others in the class. I am thrilled to say that it went off beautifully – the learners really enjoyed themselves, and it was great revision in terms of the various aspects that were covered.



Biljana Naumoska has been in teaching and education for the last 20 years – most of that time has been spent in higher education, aside from a short period when she taught at private language schools, right after graduating. As an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature in the Faculty of Philology, she teaches students majoring in English at an undergraduate and postgraduate level. She also teaches Business English to students enrolled in the Faculty of Economy, and she is the co-author of two coursebooks for the use of those students – *Business English 1* and *Business English 2*. Apart from teaching, she is also involved in other activities – she translates, participates in conferences, workshops, seminars, and projects, and is an examiner for various internationally-recognised English assessment exams.