**Practical Techniques for Working with Multiword Expressions**

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**Multiword Expressions**

**(and Recurrent Phrases)**

Multiword expressions and phrases are combinations of two or more words that tend to be found together in text and discourse, e.g. ***thank you, thank you very much, thanks a lot***, but not \****thanks you*** or ***\*thank you a lot***.

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| 1. Multiword expressions are astoundingly frequent and ubiquitous in all manner of language.   According to some research reports, multiword phrases represent up to 70% of all language that we hear and read. |
| 1. Various research counts demonstrate that these language units number in the hundreds of thousands. |

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| 1. A key attribute of multiword expressions is that often their meanings cannot be readily understood or predicted from the meanings of their component parts.   For example, knowing the meaning of the word "***look***" and the meaning of the word "***after***" does not mean that you will know the meaning of the phrase "***look after***." |

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| 1. One of the super-important characteristics of multiword expressions is that **it is not usually possible to translate them from one language to another** by employing any type of grammar or vocabulary rules. |

Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia (2016, p. 44) refer to multiword expressions as "**notoriously difficult.**"

In general, based on the research on the frequencies and accuracy of L2 multiword expressions, two clear and well-established conclusions are made:

* L2 spoken or written production contains prominently fewer multiword expressions than L1 production.
* L2 uses of multiword units are typically error-prone and incongruous, e.g.

\**a really problem, \*cause a trouble, \*brotherly law, \*expensive to developing,* or *\*make a humor*

This presentation take a brief look at the following areas:

* The reasons that multiword expressions are difficult to learn and use
* Effective and ineffective teaching techniques

**Why Multiword Expressions Are Difficult to Learn**

1. Learners tend to notice and focus on single vocabulary items that are typically emphasized in grammar and vocabulary instruction and neglect multiword expressions in which these words can occur.

This is particularly true in regard to high frequency words that so often combine to form multiword constructions.

For example, the verbs ***do*, *have***, and ***make*** are among the most frequent ones in English, and they are components in the largest number of frequent multiword expressions.

1. Learners tend NOT to notice structural differences between L1 and L2 expressions with similar meanings,   
     
   e.g. *\*in the phone, \*make homework, \*make a different, \*keep eyes on, \*a solution for a problem, \*move fastly, \*a lot of hardly work, \*pay expensive price, \*get a high test*.
2. When multiword expressions are easy to understand, their grammatical form and structural irregularities often go unnoticed.

These expressions look, sound, and feel familiar even when their formal elements are in fact incorrect, e.g.

*\*take an appointment, \*make a walk, \*quick car, \*do a mistake, \*make an accident, \*make a picture, \*denied from, \*come into the car, \*high reputation, \*say a question, \*go into trouble, \*explain him/her, \*change the bus, \*commit an error,* or *\*have a restful*.

1. The length of multiword phrases, taken together with their unfamiliar metaphorical (non-literal) meanings, makes them difficult to learn and use correctly.

## Ineffective Teaching Techniques

The following teaching techniques have been found to be less than effective in the teaching and retention of multiword expressions:

* **Fill-in-the-blank** practice leads to particularly poor learning and retention, and results in particularly limited usage in production (e.g. Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead, & Webb, 2014; Pellicer-Sanchez, 2020).
* Without deliberate attention and focus on the grammar components of phrases, **incidental learning** of multiword constructions typically results low language gains and very little learning (Boers, 2021; Hinkel, 2002, 2020; Laufer & Girsai, 2008).
* Providing **insufficient review and too few repeated exposures** represents one of the most pervasive ineffective instructional strategies.

## Effective and Practical Teaching Techniques

A **key technique** is to bring learners' **attention and deliberate learning** work to focus on the grammatical elements of multiword expressions -- their uses, forms, and structures, e.g. the order of the language elements, singular and plural markers, articles, and prepositions.

The teacher's guidance is essential because without it, learners are left to their own devices and simply do not notice or pay attention to these phrases.

A few key factors lead to vocabulary learning and language gains, be it single-word or multilingual expressions (Webb & Nation, 2017):

* **Repeated encounters**
* **Spaced repetition**
* **Purposeful and deliberate attention, work, and practice (and practice)**

According to many studies to date, for adult learners, a strong and significant learning advantage can be obtained with **at least 10 to 15 repeated exposures** and follow-ups (Boers, 2000; Nation, 2011, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017).

**Learning to Notice**

* When learners listen or read for meaning, **a strong tendency is for multiword expressions to escape attention**.
* For beginning and intermediate learners, numerous phrases can be found in textbooks, test preparation materials, or even advertisements or flyers.
* The ones that are easier to work with typically consist of **two words** and have **transparent meanings** that can be comprehensible at a glance.

Example 1

*--* ***They say*** *that breakfast is* ***the most important*** *meal* ***of the day****.*

*-- Who* ***has the time*** *to* ***eat breakfast****?*

*-- Well,* ***getting up******a few minutes*** *earlier could give you* ***enough time*** *for a* ***quick meal.***

In short and clear listening excerpts of conversations, the text can be repeated a couple of times as needed, and the frequent multiword expressions are easy to identify, notice, and elaborate with additional useful elements if the structures permit small variations:

A List of Multiword Expressions

* *they say / people say*
* *the most important / the most expensive / the most difficult*
* *have time (to do something) / have no time / give some time / enough time*
* *eat breakfast/lunch/dinner* (no article with the noun unless there is an adjective e.g. *eat a large breakfast, eat a hurried lunch*)
* ***a*** *few minutes /* ***a*** *few days /* ***a*** *few months* (the article ***a*** is required)
* *enough time / not enough time/ plenty of time / lots of time*
* *a quick meal / break / stop*
* A list with new vocabulary and multiword phrases that is handed out **ahead** of the listening or reading practice can provide additional opportunities for learning and remembering useful constructions.
* Many teaching moments can arise if the teacher chooses to focus learners' attention on the lexical and grammatical constraints that are properties of all recurrent phrases.

Example 2

*-- Mr. Jones* ***had an appointment*** *in the city center, and so he* ***had to*** *leave the office.*

*-- Did he say when he is* ***coming back****?*

*-- Well, it shouldn't* ***take*** *him more than* ***a couple of hours*** *if he doesn’t* ***run into******heavy traffic****.*

A List

* *have an appointment / make an appointment / schedule an appointment*
* *come back*
* *take* + time*, e.g. take an hour, take a minute, take a week, take a day / month / year*
* ***a*** *couple of hour****s***(an article is required; the noun has to have the plural form)

***a*** *couple of week****s****,* ***a*** *couple of sandwiche****s****,* ***a*** *couple of dollar****s****,* ***a*** *couple of student****s***

* *run into*
* *heavy traffic*
* Simultaneous reading and listening, with writing activities for follow-ups, have proven to be more effective for learning and retention than listening or reading alone.
* Repetition, written exercises, and writing production are usually seen as the most accessible and effective teaching techniques to promote learning.
* Although any type of additional exposure, review, and repeated recall practice can lead to important vocabulary gains over time, written practice, oral utterances (saying it aloud), and speaking exercises can make a difference in language retention.
* Repeated written tasks, writing practice, and oral review probably represent the most effective learning techniques when carried out with sufficient frequencies that can lead to durable language gains in the long run.
* **Repeated encounters**
* **Spaced repetition**
* **Purposeful and deliberate attention, work, and practice (and practice)**

Here's another practical activity for Identifying multiword expressions and phrases in readings

* Locate two to four **short** news articles (easily found online) and hand them out to the students.
* In small groups or as a whole class, ask learners to note and make a list of multiword expressions and phrases.

These expressions are counted to figure out their overall number relative to the number of words in the texts.

* How common do these expressions and recurrent phrases appear to be?
* In **English as a Foreign Language** settings, the same activity can be repeated in learners' first language(s).

Corpus-based studies indicate that around **20 verbs**, such as *break, come, catch, open, pick, pass, put, take,* and *turn*, combined with particles and adverbs make up a vast majority of phrasal verbs, that is, slightly over 500,000 usage instances.

The teaching and learning of two- and three-word verbs requires an intensive focus on their meanings and grammar attributes, rather than on learning these just as vocabulary items.

The key consideration in learning practice is to give learners an opportunity to use the multiword expressions and academic phrases that they would not otherwise have in their spoken casual and informal interactions.

* **Repeated exposures**
* **Spaced repetition and practice**
* **Purposeful and deliberate attention and focused work**

**Practice, Practice, Practice!**

**Phrase and Collocation Dictionaries:**

Useful dictionaries of set phrases that can provide comprehensive collections of key phrase words and their frequent accompanying words:

* McIntosh, C., Francis, B., Poole, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Oxford collocations dictionary for students of English*, (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
* Rundell, M., Fox, G. (Eds.). (2010). *Macmillan collocations dictionary for learners of English*. Oxford: Macmillan.
* Lea, D. (2009). *Oxford collocations dictionary for students of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
* Benson, M., Benson, E. & Ilson, R. (2010). *The BBI combinatory dictionary of English: A guide to word combinations,* (3rd ed). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
* *Longman Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2015). Edinburgh: Pearson Education.

**Phrasal Verbs Dictionaries:**

* *Cambridge Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2006). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
* *Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2nd edition) (2000). Edinburgh: Pearson Education.
* *Macmillan Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (2005). New York & Oxford: Macmillan Education.
* *Oxford Phrasal Verbs* (2006). Oxford: Oxford University Press.



**The End**

**Thank You for Coming**