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Teaching and Learning Multiword Expressions

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Introduction: Multiword Expressions of All Sorts

Language instruction almost always takes place under great time constraints for many teachers and learners, and it is important to maximize language gains and make learning as efficient as possible. Teachers are usually keenly aware of how short course and class times are and how limited resources can be. In language teaching across all the skills, a critical factor is to make student learning as efficient and strategic as possible.

For learners, becoming proficient in vocabulary and grammar takes a great deal of time and work simply because the English grammar system is complex, and the number of words to be learned, retained, and practiced is enormous. An excellent case in point is that English dictionaries intended specifically for language learners are large books, and some have upwards of a couple hundred thousand words, phrases, and examples. To further complicate matters, many frequent words are combined in various patterns to create new meanings that cannot be figured out from the meaning of their component parts, e.g. *take up, take down, take after, take on, take in, take off, take a raincheck, give credit, give in, give out, give up, give a hand, give a shout, give a break*.

A giant number of corpus analyses that have been carried out since at least the 1960s has shed a great deal of light on the types and frequency of multiword expressions in language uses in speech and writing. An undisputed research finding to date is that multiword expressions and phrases are extremely common. Some researchers have claimed that "up to 70% of everything we say, hear, read, or write is to be found in some form of fixed expression" (Hill, 2000, p. 53). Others have counted their occurrences in the hundreds of thousands, but the point is that multiword expressions are so numerous that their exact numbers are unknown (Nation, 2011, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017).

In language teaching and research, at present, a clear consensus has been achieved that understanding and producing language is in fact impossible without the use of multiword expressions. Another, and equally important, finding is that without explicit instruction, most language learners cannot readily identify the occurrence or prevalence of multiword phrases in English discourse. In part for this reason, opportunities for learning how and when to use them in language comprehension or production are often diminished.

To add to the mix (this is a multiword expression), in English many words — and particularly frequent ones — are polysemous, that is, they have multiple meanings, and the more meanings words have, the more frequently they occur. For example, dozens of combinations with the verbs *have* and *tell* can be encountered in speech and writing, e.g.,

DOI: 10.4324/9781003106609-36

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have — *have fun, have a meal, have a heart, have a meeting, have a baby, have a dentist, have a rest, have a break, have a shower, have an argument, have a chat, have a problem/have problems, have a talk, have a drink/coffee/tea, have a run*
tell — *tell a secret, tell a joke, tell a lie, tell a story, tell the truth, tell the difference, tell the time, tell apart, tell a tale.*

Definitions of multiword expressions and phrases that can be more rigid or more flexible vary greatly in language studies. However, the accepted basic premise is that they are recurrent combinations of words — words that are connected to other words — that are remembered and used as single lexical [vocabulary] items (Hinkel, 2015, 2019, 2020). Examples can be found anywhere: *get a job, get a degree, do homework, make a mistake, make do (with), make problems, tall order, short order, short shrift, short on cash, department store, know well, deal with, for sure, not on your life, in any shape or form, famous for, play piano/cards/chess/around/the field, learn one's lesson, quite a bit, a little bit, bit by bit, nowhere in sight, fast food, fast track, in the fast lane*.

In language teaching and research, there are more than 40 terms that refer to these expressions, e.g. chunks, lexical phrases, phrasal verbs, fixed expressions, lexical bundles, set phrases, collocations, prefabricated constructions, fixed strings, idioms, formulaic language, formulaic sequences, routines, phrasal constructions, phrasal vocabulary units, or frozen phrases (Wood, 2020). By and large, as in this chapter, combinations of words that frequently occur and re-occur together are called **multiword expressions or phrases**.

Multiword expressions have a few specific characteristics. Some are inflexible and do not allow much room for variation, e.g. *better late than never, get out of hand, miss the boat, a hill of beans, you can say that again*. Others can be variable and thus permit component substitutions, e.g.

> *the purpose~/aim~/goal of this paper~/essay~/study, a careful examination~/analysis~/discussion, an important aspect~/point~/issue~/consideration.*

A prominent property of most — but certainly not all — multiword phrases is that their meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of their component parts (more on this later). That is, they have non-literal meanings that typically have to be used and learned as whole meaningful (and lexical) units. Learning the meanings and grammatical components of multiword phrases is tedious and work-intensive because they cannot be assembled on the fly and in the process of communication (Hinkel, 2019, 2020; Nation et al., 2016).

This chapter provides an overview of the reasons that multiword expressions are difficult to learn and use, effective and ineffective teaching techniques, and how to select phrases for teaching. Multiword expressions can be taught at practically any proficiency level and in all language skills, and they can be found in any type of discourse and text. A few teaching tactics suggested here can be further modified as needed in any teaching context. Multiword expressions are extremely frequent. Their meanings and uses are highly conventionalized and idiomatic, and effective language comprehension and production can be practically impossible without them (Ur, 2012, 2014).

Why Multiword Expressions Are Difficult to Learn

Due to the fact that multiword expressions are essential in both speech and writing, many studies have undertaken to investigate their frequency and accuracy rates in L2 comprehension and production. For learners, multiword expressions have almost always presented an area of difficulty. For instance, L2 users may employ constructions that are hardly ever encountered in spoken or written English discourse. To be sure, in any language, there are probably different ways to say something, but

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in the case of errors, even when their meanings can be transparent, "the problem is that native speakers do not say it in that way" (Shin & Nation, 2008, p. 340), e.g. **during we walked* instead of *while we walked*, or **hurt feeling* instead of *hurt someone's feelings*, or **pay to attention* instead of *pay attention*.

In English speech and writing, phrases and expressions are typically culture-specific with implicit references to abstract or metaphorical concepts that may or may not exist in learners' natal cultures or first languages (L1s) (Hinkel, 2017, 2018, 2019), e.g. *a dime a dozen, cut corners, cut it out, a cut above, to cut someone off, (to be) cut up about something, a cutting comment, cut the price/a price cut, cut and dried, cut some slack*.

At present, research has established that the frequencies of multiword expressions in L2 production trail far behind those encountered in L1 prose, and in general terms, this finding comes as little surprise. In the production of learners at the lower proficiency levels, the rates of multiword phrases are understandably lower than those in language uses at advanced levels. However, even in the language production of most advanced academic learners, multiword phrases are employed in incorrect forms or with incongruent meanings far more frequently than those that are used correctly, e.g. **a really problem, *cause a trouble, *brotherly law, *expensive to developing*, or **make a humor* (Boers, 2020; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Peters, 2016).

One of the most readily apparent causes of the learning difficulty clearly lies in the fact that multiword expressions consist of two or more component parts and thus learning and using them correctly requires more intensive work and attention, compared to single-word vocabulary items. However, further complications have been identified as multiword expressions compound learning and usage difficulty (Boers, 2021; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012; Liu, 2011).

- 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. That is, these words themselves are not new, but the forms and meanings of the phrases with these words can certainly be.

  For example, the words *call* and *look* are extremely frequent, and they can be found in dozens of combinations with other words that have more transparent or less understandable meanings, e.g. *call off/on/out/up, call forwarding, give a call back, call it a day, answer the call, a close call, call it quits, look on/up, look back on, look ahead, look forward to, look something up, look cheap, look out!, look like, look alike, take/have a look, look like a million bucks, things are looking up*.

- Learners tend not to notice structural differences between L1 and L2 expressions with similar meanings, e.g. **suffer/die from, *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*.
- When multiword expressions have meanings that are easy to understand, their grammatical form and structure irregularities often go unnoticed. Furthermore, the frequent words can be combined when they should not actually be used together to produce idiomatic and accurate constructions. In fact, Laufer (2011, p. 44) refers to the uses of such incorrect expressions as the trap of "deceptive compatibility."

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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.*

- The length of multiword phrases, taken together with their unfamiliar metaphorical (non-literal) meanings, makes them difficult to learn and use correctly. For instance, phrasal verbs consist of a verb and one or two particles, and these can create an additional layer of complexity that demands further attention in comprehension and production.

  In English, the more meanings verbs have, the more frequently they tend to occur. The most frequent verbs in English are as follows, and these can be found in hundreds of combinations with other words.

THE MOST FREQUENT VERBS IN ENGLISH

be	*have*	*do*	*say*	*go*	*make*	*know*
think	*see*	*take*	*come*	*want*	*look*	*use*
find	*give*	*tell*	*work*	*call*	*try*	

Most proficient language users attain proficiency with multiword expressions over time and through repeated (and repeated) encounters in speech, reading, and writing (Hinkel, 2015, 2016; Nation, 2011). Selecting the multiword constructions that are frequent and useful is important in instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (more on this later).

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.

In general terms, a few key factors lead to any type of 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).

Incidental exposure provides little learning advantage, as discussed later.

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, these can occur in listening or reading selections, however short. Numerous phrases can be found in textbooks, test preparation materials, or even advertisements or flyers (Hinkel, 2019). The ones that are easier to work with

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typically consist of two words and have transparent meanings that can be comprehensible at a glance. Here are a couple of examples of listening dialogues with the multiword expressions highlighted for teaching:

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*** morning ***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:

- *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)
- *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. In general terms, many teaching moments can arise if the teacher chooses to focus learners' attention on the lexical and grammatical constraints that are indelible properties of all recurrent phrases, no exceptions.

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***.

- *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 hours* (an article is required; the noun has to have the plural form)
  a couple of weeks, a couple of sandwiches, a couple of dollars, a couple of students
- *run into*
- *heavy traffic*

Usually, the more frequent and transparent phrases are found in texts for beginners and intermediate learners. However, when listening and reading selections consist of familiar words and short expressions — and when their meanings are transparent — multiword constructions and their grammar variables can be particularly error-prone. Thus, the simpler and more understandable the text is, the more deliberate attention is required to address the grammar of the phrases (Boers, 2021).

Writing It Down to Remember

Analyzing multiword expressions and establishing their literal and then additionally metaphorical meanings can help learners remember and deploy them in L2 production (Boers, Lindstromberg

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et al., 2014). A range of effective teaching techniques and learning activities can and do lead to retention rates that can go up to 70% when accompanied by memorization and practice (Laufer, 2005). Such language exposures as 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 (see the Dictogloss section that follows), oral utterances (saying it aloud), and speaking exercises can make a difference in language retention. Deliberate and focused teaching, explicit and direct activities, drawing learners' attention to multiword constructions and their linguistic components can all combine to promote important language gains. Overall, 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.

Dictogloss

(Probably one of the most effective multiword teaching techniques)

Dictogloss is a language teaching activity when the teacher reads a short text or plays a recording, usually more than twice, while learners listen, write down words and phrases that they identify and hear, and then reconstruct the entire texts after listening. The texts selected for dictogloss can be short or long to make them suitable for learners' proficiency levels.

Research has shown that dictogloss is one of the most efficient teaching activities for learning and that it provides a number of important advantages (Lindstromberg et al., 2016; Snoder & Reynolds, 2018). The list of unfamiliar vocabulary words, expressions, or grammar constructions can be pretaught — and later reviewed — depending on the text length and complexity.

Here's an example of a short text that can be used in a dictogloss activity. The useful multiword expressions are highlighted.

> *There are thousands of **kinds of** apples, but only **a few** are **the most popular** among farmers and gardeners. Three favorites **make up** more than **sixty percent** of all apples that are grown **in many locations around the world**. Apple varieties can have **different colors**, **such as** yellow, green, or red, and the taste can be tart or sweet. A typical **grocery store** sells **lots of** varieties of apples because people **include** them **in** their lunches they **bring from** home or buy **when it is convenient**. Apples can be **cut into** slices or wedges to eat **as a snack** and prepared **ahead of time**.*
>
> *Apple trees grow **small to medium size**, and they **take up** far **less room in the garden** than larger trees. **A couple of** apple trees can produce **plenty of** fruit **for a family** and to **share with friends**. Apples require a **cool climate** to **do well in the summer**. To bloom, the trees need **lots of** sun **for several hours a day**.*

The text can be a conversation, a story, or an excerpt as short as one paragraph and as long as several. The first step is for students to listen — two or three times — and write down as many words and expressions as they can identify. A good practice can take two to four repeated readings. These noted language components provide the base for a written reconstruction of as much of the text as possible.

Students can work alone, in pairs, or small groups, and then they can check one another's work to supplement the additional exposures and practice. This activity can be very productive because it addresses a number of language skills at one time, e.g. spelling, word building, multiword expressions, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence constructions. A classroom dictogloss can take as little as 5–10 minutes, and it can be used as often as preferred.

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Ineffective Teaching Techniques

The types of activities that lead to effective or ineffective learning of vocabulary and multiword expressions have been investigated for the past couple of centuries. Although learning single-word vocabulary is easier than learning multiword constructions, in many ways, the techniques for teaching and remembering them do not differ greatly.

The language exercises often found in student textbooks depend on the authors' personal preferences and book-related expediency, but not necessarily on research findings of what leads to better and more durable learning and retention. For instance, a large number of studies have demonstrated that **fill-in-the-blank** activities are the most common exercises included in student materials. These can take the form of filling in the missing elements of phrases or sentences, or choosing the phrase components from multiple choice sets, or sentence completion tasks. However, blank-filling practice is likely to be **least effective**, and it provides few learning advantages. For one thing, for learners, it is often impossible to figure out correctly what missing word or grammar component should go into the blank and result in a structurally or contextually accurate expression.

In vocabulary research, the work on multiword expressions is usually divided into at least two modes: (1) incidental learning when any sort of vocabulary is learned in the course of a lesson or during exposure to spoken or written text, and (2) deliberate (intentional) learning that takes place with effort, practice, and subsequent review. However, numerous studies have shown that incidental learning is hardly ever effective and typically provides few learning advantages.

In gist, 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 et al., 2014; Pellicer-Sanchez, 2020).
- Without deliberate attention and focus on the grammar components of phrases, incidental learning of multiword constructions typically results in 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. 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).

A Note on Teaching and Learning Multiword Expressions

In student textbooks and dictionaries, multiword expressions are regularly provided for their cultural distinctiveness and eccentricity, regardless of their frequency or practicality, e.g. *on cloud nine, on a dime, once in a blue moon, in the dog house, bark up a wrong tree*. However, the most useful and commonplace multiword phrases are those that are less exotic, and they tend to consist of high frequency words, e.g. *take off/on/out, take a break/a call/one's time*.

As stated earlier, the most frequent single-word verbs, such as ***have, take, make, do,*** and ***go***, serve as the basis for the most statistically prevalent multiword constructions (Webb & Nation, 2017). Carefully selecting productive and useful expressions for learning can become an ongoing task for both teachers and learners.

According to long-established research findings, flash cards or electronic applications and tools, e.g. mini self-quizzes, review lists, or organized lists, represent the single most efficient way of

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learning and practicing vocabulary and expressions for retention. Numerous electronic applications send automatic and timed review notifications and reminders — a great convenience for teachers and learners (Boers, 2021; Nation, 2011, 2013).

Multiword expression notebooks are also a very useful, efficient, and practical learning aid because reviewing the items that have been covered and learned previously can be made easier when they are collected in one place (Hinkel, 2016, 2017).

Selecting Multiword Expressions for Teaching

Although multiword expressions can be found anywhere, some are more frequent and valuable to learn, but others might be less so. In the classifications of multiword constructions, phrasal verbs have deservedly received much attention. In fact, their numbers are so large that exact or even proximate counts are unknown. An excellent case in point is that two highly-regarded and classical dictionaries published by Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, since the 1980s and to this day, have released dictionaries of phrasal verbs as separate volumes to supplement their main dictionaries of English.

Phrasal Verbs

(By far, the most frequent type of multiword expressions)

Phrasal verbs are not only very numerous, but they are also highly idiomatic, often untranslatable, and opaque. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines these multiword expressions as "a combination of a verb and an adverb or a verb and a preposition [also called particles], or both, in which the combination has a meaning different from the meaning of the words considered separately." Ubiquitous examples of these phrases are found in most student textbooks, e.g. *bring about, clean up, move forward, move around, move into, fill in, look up to, look for, turn down, turn around, turn off.*

Phrasal verbs have almost always presented a great deal of difficulty for language learners and, by extension, for teachers and for teaching. For example, such phrases as *take on* has at least a dozen main meanings (e.g. *hire, sign up, enroll, meet an adversary, acquire a particular quality, accept, take possession of, admit*), and *make up, take out, call out*, or *put down* can be nouns or verbs, and spelled together or separately, each with different meanings.

By and large, learners do not notice or learn phrasal verbs that occur in text because their language components may not be new, but word combinations are likely to be, e.g. *hand in, hand out, ask around, brush up, brush off, come by, come from, dust off, dust up, clear out, chip in, chip off, chip out, drop off, drop by, drop from, drop out*. Phrasal verbs are extremely common both in speech and informal writing, and they are prevalent and highly polysemous, that is, they have different meanings even when they consist of the same words (as in these examples). For instance, according to Gardner and Davis (2007), 100 most frequent verbs with particles have an average of 5.6 meanings each.

Two- and three-word verbs are so frequent and their uses are so crucial for any sort of English comprehension and production that they are a teaching necessity. However, they are also so widespread that to select the most useful and practical ones for teaching and learning, the teacher's guidance is of the essence. Pointing out, identifying, and discussing phrasal verbs in context are the essential steps in teaching these verbs. Teachers need to explicitly focus students' attention on their form, structure, and meaning.

A few additional considerations are key when working with phrasal verbs in the classroom.

- The uses of multiword verbs can differ substantially according to degree of formality or informality of a specific text.

For example, *take off* can have a relatively formal meaning as in *departure*, e.g. *Please fasten your seatbelts for takeoff* (a noun), or a more informal *leave to go*, as in *I'm taking off now, and I'll see you tomorrow.* The same is true about such frequent constructions as *go on/up/down, take on, clean up*, or *drop down.*

- Two- or three-word verbs are **infrequent in academic writing**, but they are predominant in speaking and conversations (Biber et al., 1999). The most common academic phrasal verbs are to be set out in or to be set up in used at the rate of 0.002% (20 occurrences per million words).
- Particle movement is one of the thorniest issues in L2 production of multiword expressions, e.g. *put the bag down — put down the bag, turn the light off — turn off the light, make a story up — make up a story.*

The rules that govern the particle movement are complicated, but there are a couple of pointers that can be easy to teach and learn:

- most — but not all — phrasal verbs can have a mobile noun, but not a pronoun, e.g.
  - o *put <u>the hat</u> on / put on <u>the hat</u> / put <u>it</u> on*, but not **put on <u>it</u>*
  - o *clean up <u>the spill</u> / clean <u>the spill</u> up / clean <u>it</u> up,* but not **clean up <u>it</u>*
  - o *bring <u>the change</u> about / bring about <u>the change</u> / bring <u>it</u> about,* but not **bring about <u>it</u>*
- phrases with two particles do not move around, e.g.
  - o *feel up to, watch out for, pull out of, move on to, catch up with, add up to*

Two- and three-word verbs are time-consuming to learn, and they have to be chosen judiciously and with care. As mentioned earlier, most multiword constructions differ greatly in their usefulness and frequency. Accurate uses of phrasal verbs require a targeted spotlight on their lexical and grammatical features.

Here's a list of the 30 most frequent phrasal verbs that may be worth time and attention (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015).

THE 30 MOST FREQUENT PHRASAL VERBS (IN DECLINING ORDER)

go on	*pick up*	*come back*	*come up*	*go back*
find out	*come out*	*go out*	*point out*	*grow up*
set up	*turn out*	*get out*	*come in*	*take on*
give up	*make up*	*end up*	*get back*	*look up*
figure out	*sit down*	*get up*	*take out*	*come on*
go down	*show up*	*take off*	*work out*	*stand up*

On the whole, corpus-based studies, such as Biber et al. (1999), Garnier and Schmitt (2015), and Liu (2011), 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. That is to say that 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 as vocabulary items.

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Teaching Speaking

A large number of studies have shown clearly that conversations and specific sequences in conversations are routinized and highly structured (Coulmas, 1981; Shin & Nation, 2008; Hinkel, 2014, 2019). Conversational and stereotypical exchanges are almost universally presented in student textbooks for teaching listening and speaking.

In everyday conversations, routinized phrases can be readily identified in casual greetings, partings, or service requests, and most include highly recurrent expressions. These can be used with a practically unlimited range of functions, such as openings, introductions, answering the phone, making excuses, pre-closings (*alright then, sounds like we are all set*), closings, offering, ordering, asking for directions or clarifications, or making appointments.

Routine conversational exchanges can be utilized to develop learners' practical language skills, spoken fluency, and easily accessible lexical substitutions, e.g. *How are you / How is it going / How're things / How's everything going*.

The uses of routine multiword phrases readily provide a great resource when L2 speaking takes place in real-time and under pressure (Hinkel, 2014. 2015; Nation & Webb, 2011). Specific multiword expressions typically mark discourse junctures and conversation organizational structure. In this example of a conversation starter and a request, a few multiword phrases are easy to identify.

3) -- *Hello,* ***how are doing today****?*
-- *Great.* ***How're you. I'd like*** *to* ***make an*** *appointment for a haircut.*
-- ***What time would*** *you* ***like to come, in the morning*** *or* ***in the afternoon****?*
-- *I* ***have to*** *work* ***during the day. Do you have*** *any evening appointments?*

Although conversations progress along predictable patterns, participants often need to adjust and readjust what they are saying to fit varied and variable social settings. The uses of multiword expressions can be strongly distinguished based on their formality levels and social suitability in a range of contexts. In many cases, textbook examples do not always differentiate clearly between expressions that are appropriate in, for example, small talk with friends and those that should be used in more formal exchanges. For example, the phrases *What's up?*, and *How's it going?* are used almost exclusively in short and casual encounters with peers, but they do not seem to be the best options when talking to a boss, a teacher, or a doctor.

Another important characteristic of conversational phrases is that they can have divergent goals and functions in real-life interactions. For example, *How are you/today/this morning?* or *How is it going?* are not intended to be real questions or conversation openers. These phrases are typically used as greetings and to signal that the other party is recognized and acknowledged (see the example earlier). As an outcome, these formulaic expressions do not require a response, beyond the formulaic, e.g. *Fine, Great, Good, OK.*

In teaching, it is important to note and notice a great number of formulaic multiword expressions when the conversational function can be difficult for learners to determine and when it is not directly apparent from their linguistic form and components, e.g.

- *Call me* ***some time*** vs. *Call me* ***on Tuesday.***
- *Let's get together/have lunch* ***some time*** vs. *Let's get together/have lunch* ***on Friday.***
- *Call me* ***if you have any questions*** vs. *Call me* ***any time****.*
- *Do you have* ***any questions****?* (it is now time to ask questions, if you have them) vs.
- *I'll be happy to answer all your questions* ***during the office hours*** (that is, please do not ask me any questions now but come to my office at the designated time).

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- *Your paper needs **a little work*** (this expression does not mean necessarily that the paper needs only a little bit of work to be improved).
- *Maybe, you need to **spend more time** on your homework* (does not mean that spending more time without greater effort would result in better grades).

In more formal presentations and university lectures, multiword expressions are also very common, and their typical functions are to highlight discourse segments or transitions from one section to the next. Among the most frequent are such collocations as *on the one hand, on the other hand, as a result of, it is important to, take a look at, at the same time, for this reason, a little bit, in the end*, and *the best way* (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). These multiword expressions are longer and more complex than the ones used in conversations. Learning their forms and functions is more laborious and probably better suited for academic learners.

The most frequent formal spoken multiword expressions are worth the work and effort. They include fewer than a dozen, but for learners, these are very useful simply because they are very frequent, grammatically irregular, and rigid in their forms. Here's the list of a few most common expressions for formal speaking.

FREQUENT EXPRESSIONS FOR SPEAKING

on the one hand / on the other hand	*I think (that) / I don't think so*
the most important thing / an important point	*I would like to / would you like to?*
my point is that … *my first point/second point/final point the next / second point*	*the same (as) … / different from … the difference between* *the relationship between*
for example/for instance	*another thing / the other thing*

Many multiword expressions for formal speaking can be useful for intermediate and high intermediate learners, but on the whole, such constructions can be useful at any proficiency level, including the beginners.

Teaching Writing

As with conversational discourse, what is appropriate and inappropriate in academic written discourse is highly conventionalized. In practically all language programs, a great deal of attention, time, and resources are devoted to the teaching of academic writing. The reason that academic writing needs to be explicitly and persistently taught is that English-language writing conventions are not necessarily found in other written discourse traditions (Hinkel, 2011, 2013, 2014).

Academic writing is also highly patterned and rigidly structured, and particularly so in the case of student essays and written assignments (Hinkel, 2015, 2020; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). The stereotypical structure of most academic writing usually begins with an opening or an introductory statement, followed by the topic nomination, then moving on to the main points, and some sort of closing statement at the end. Generally speaking, the progression of writing from one rhetorical section to the next is clearly identified by means of flexible and conventionalized multiword expressions, such as *to begin, to conclude / in conclusion, the purpose of this paper is to / this essay will discuss, my main point*, as well as phrasal constructions, such as *in addition, as a result, for this reason, in general, for example / for instance*.

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The analyses of written formulaic expressions have been carried out for many decades. To date, a great number of frequent multiword expressions typically ubiquitous in academic writing have been identified and included in practically all student guidebooks. Using recurrent phrases in instruction and learning to write is likely to be one of the few available expedient routes to relative L2 accuracy and fluency that leads to effective production and subsequent automatization — over time and with practice.

For language learners, a tremendous advantage of working with multiword expressions lies in expedited learning and reduced work load in the long run. For example, high-frequency word combinations and phrases can be learned as whole units, instead of just their elements that have to be further assembled during the process of language production.

In teaching, multiword expressions can be used with language elements of all shapes and sizes, from single words, e.g. *much / many, a number of / a large number of / a great deal of*, to phrases to whole sentences or even sets of sentences, including the numerous areas of difficulty, such as idioms and metaphors, e.g.

- *take ~~ a look at / an opportunity to / ~~~ part in / ~~~ into consideration*
- *This paper describes and analyzes … xxx. / This paper discusses/examines xxx*
- *The main points of my essay are …*
- *In general, / On the whole, / One can generalize that xxx*
- *The author states/argues/explains/shows that*
- *The article / book describes / discusses / tells a story of / about*

A large number of academic multiword expressions can have transparent meanings. Although some are longer than two or three words, typically, such phrases consist of only one or two content words accompanied by function words, such as articles (*a, an, the*) and highly frequent prepositions (e.g. *of, in, to, for, with, on, at, from*).

Academic phrases and sentence pieces can become an efficient means of expanding L2 writers' language range, particularly when learners are also taught how to substitute discrete elements in practical ways (as illustrated throughout this chapter). Differences and similarities between phrases allow learners to create new constructions in various combinations or to modify those that are already learned and accessible.

When working with frequent academic phrases, it is important to bring learners' attention to fundamental distinctions between conversational and informal language that is unmistakably different from that in formal writing. Pointing out the differences in these two types of construction is of the essence: without explicit teaching, learners may simply miss (and often do) the distinctions between conversational and formal academic language components.

At first glance teaching academic phrases and sentences may seem somewhat overwhelming, but a great advantage lies in the fact that academic text is highly formulaic and conventionalized. With the ground work in pre-patterned expressions and sentences — with practice — producing academic prose in both speech and writing is a learned skill. This is true about both L2 and L1 writers who learn formal speaking and writing in the course of their schooling and education.

A Final Note

As with all language learning, repeated exposures and practice (and practice) lead to long-term memory retention and subsequent production in speaking and writing. In most cases, multiword expressions are difficult to learn and use correctly because, at the very least, their meanings can be opaque, and their structures are grammatically irregular. Many multiword expressions are culture- and language-bound, and cannot be pieced together in the process of communication. They are longer than single words and consist of several component parts.

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Most phrasal verbs, for instance, do not have immediately comprehensible and transparent meanings, but the meanings of phrases in conversations and academic writing can be deducible. Short conversational and written phrases are suitable for teaching to learners at any level.

- Two- or three-word multiword expressions are the easiest to understand and learn. The shorter the expression, the fewer components to learn.
- This principle applies to phrases of practically any kind, including those that consist of a function word (an article or a preposition) and a content word or two content words, e.g. *have **a** drink* but *have lunch/dinner* (no article), *do nothing, make trouble, make **a** cake, look **up a** word, take **a** minute / **a couple of** minutes*.
- For teaching and learning, short collocations and multiword units are encountered far more frequently than longer ones, and thus, can be easier to notice, learn, and practice.

A reliable rule of thumb is that the shorter the phrase is, the more likely it is to have a transparent meaning and grammatical structure (Nation, 2013; Nation et al., 2016). Examples of frequent multiword expressions are easy to locate: they are everywhere.

Because two-word phrases are highly common and can be found in both speech and writing, they are also relatively straightforward to come up with online, in dictionaries, and various teaching materials, such as picture books and electronic texts (Hinkel, 2014, 2015, 2018). On the whole, teaching and learning short multiword units is not a very demanding task due to their frequency. According to some computations, for instance, one phrasal verb occurs in every 150 words in English (Gardner & Davis, 2007).

In general terms, ubiquitous multiword expressions can be practiced in conversations or formal academic writing when they are added, omitted, and modified to match different types of contexts, formality levels, teaching and learning goals, and learners' proficiencies, from beginning to advanced. All in all, a great range of concepts, ideas, and functions are expressed by means of multiword expressions, and English language usage is impossible without them.

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