

Phrasal verbs as learning material in Business English courses for students majoring in Linguistics

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The study highlights the existing views on the nature of English phrasal verbs and their theoretical grounding in Russian and English linguistics. Particular attention is paid to phrasal verbs teaching requirements as part of Business English courses for students majoring in Linguistics. The authors see phrasal verbs as a specific part of business communication that needs thorough consideration due to a disparity in the integrated semantics of a verb combined with its postpositive and the correspondent language components in a student's mother tongue. The study suggests that mere training of phrasal verbs like is insufficient, and assimilating these language units into students' communicative competence requires disclosing to them the underlying semantic structure which results in these verbs' synergistic meanings. The authors provide some classifications to explore the difficulties of learning phrasal verbs by non-native speakers. The paper also examines some aspects of Business English related to the issue and states the conditions for the mastery of phrasal verbs.

KEYWORDS: *phrasal verb, business communication, communication, teaching methods, communicative competence, business rhetoric, Business English*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for professional communication, ESP and Business English has become an important mission, with international economic and financial activity growing exponentially every decade. Working with non-native students, who have little to no experience of cross-cultural interaction is a challenging task. The key to success lies in developing very specific skills allowing future specialists to fully understand the

whole pragma-semantic spectrum of an English utterance, recognise various registers and styles of speech by numerous carefully studied language features and properly react to interlocutors' replicas in both oral and written discourse.

Traditionally, students majoring in Linguistics have an advantage over other learners as they better understand that the skills of grammatically and phonetically correct speech production aren't

enough to sound convincingly authentic. It is rhetorical skills and ability for sophisticated communication that help impress British and American partners through expression of thoughts and ideas in a clear way and get all necessary messages across. Years of teaching practice prove that main problems for EFL students can be classified into several categories: (1) English linguistic phenomena that have direct equivalents in the learners' native tongue; (2) English language units that bear a certain degree of similarity to corresponding units in the learners' native tongue; and finally (3) English language units that don't look much like corresponding units in the learners' native tongue. The third category is obviously the one that causes most difficulties in the learning process. Phrasal verbs can serve as a good example of the kind of problem that non-native speakers of English face.

The relevance of studying phrasal verbs is justified by their expansion in business written and oral discourse as well as by insufficient knowledge of all peculiarities of their usage and patterns of functioning in professional English. This paper explores how phrasal verbs can be integrated into classroom activity as learning material.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Theoretical grounding

The theoretical basis for this research comprises works on teaching methodology, functional

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linguistics and pragmatics, most notably by Professor Evgeniya Ponomarenko and Professor Elena Malyuga (Ponomarenko & Malyuga, 2012; Ponomarenko & Malyuga, 2015; Malyuga & Tomalin, 2017; Khramchenko & Radyuk, 2014). The grounding for the study of phrasal verbs includes research by scholars such as Arnold (1986), Dirven (2001), McArthur (1975), Povey (1990), etc.

Phrasal verbs are studied through Linguodidactics (Peters, 2016; Sung & Kim, 2016; Torres-Martinez, 2015; Zareva, 2016), the meaning of individual particles of phrasal verbs (Mahpeykar & Tyler, 2015; Rosca & Baker de Altamirano, 2016), and the systematisation of phrasal verbs in dictionaries (Luzer & Coslovich, 2016; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015) among others.

At Peoples' Friendship University of Russia and Tula State Lev Tolstoy Pedagogical University students of linguistics are taught basic theoretical information on phrasal verbs during seminars in Lexicology and later apply this knowledge in practical Business English classes.

2.2 Phrasal verbs in linguistics and linguodidactics – theoretical analysis

The term ‘phrasal verb’ was introduced by the American essayist and critic Logan Smith in the first quarter of the 20th century. Since then, many linguists have been studying the definition, distinctive features, and the classification of phrasal verbs. For example, according to Povey (1990), a phrasal verb can be defined as a combination of a verb (a ‘simple’ one, e.g. *walk*, *write*) and an adverbial postposition (*up*, *down*). Both elements form a single syntactic and semantic unit. In her research, Povey (1990) has identified a number of distinctive features of a phrasal verb.

1. A phrasal verb can be substituted with a ‘simple’ verb, which characterises a phrasal verb as a semantic unity. *To put up with* can be substituted by *to tolerate*; *to call up* by *to telephone*. Of course, this criterion does not apply to all phrasal verbs in the English language, since their equivalent is often a phrase. For example, the equivalent of the phrasal verb *to break down* is the phrase *to stop functioning*; *to take off – to leave the ground*.

2. Another distinctive feature of phrasal verbs is their idiomatic nature. An idiom is a combination of two or more words which meanings differ from that of the idiom itself. Most phrasal verbs cannot be reduced to the meaning of their individual

components, as in *to bring up – to educate* or *to come by – to obtain*. This criterion is not universal for all phrasal verbs. Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether the meaning of the given verb is idiomatic, since phrasal verbs typically have several meanings, some of which are idiomatic, while others are easily derived from the given phrasal verb’s components.

3. Questions with phrasal verbs have a pronominal form (*who* or *what*), rather than an adverbial form (*when* or *where*). This property of phrasal verbs helps distinguish phrasal verbs from simple verbs with a preposition.

In the introduction to the *Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* a phrasal verb is defined as a verb consisting of two (*turn on*) or three words (*look forward to*). Most phrasal verbs consist of two words – a principal verb and a particle (an adverb or preposition) (Povey, 1990, p. 12).

Krylova (2012) argues that a verb and a postposition, preserving their original meanings, do not form a semantically indivisible unit, i.e. a phrasal verb. In other words, the idiomatic meaning is an essential property of a phrasal verb (Krylova, 2012, p. 256).

Dixon (1982) notes that without the use of such phrases, a foreigner will sound unnatural and stilted, though grammatically correct. Hence,

phrasal verbs are invariably used by native speakers of English in a variety of communicative situations. MacArthur (1975) identified two types of combinations of a verb and a postposition – literal, i.e. direct meaning relating to both the verb and the particle (e.g. *The postman brought in long-expected letters*), and figurative, i.e. idiomatic meaning relating to some extent to the polylexemic verb (e.g. *A new policy was brought in by the President*). In the first example *brought in* means *delivered* and in the second – *introduced*.

German linguist Dirven (2001) defines phrasal verbs as a phenomenon characterised by idiomaticity arising in the following situations: (1) combination of a verb and a preposition (e.g. *to depend on something*); (2) combination of a verb and a detached particle (e.g. *to run up the flag, to run the flag up*); (3) combination of a verb and a non-detachable particle (e.g. *to run up a debt*); and (4) combination of a verb, a particle, and a preposition (e.g. *to face up to problems*).

Considering different approaches to teaching phrasal verbs, it is important to note that modern linguistics still lacks a single interpretation of the nature of their second component. In research and academic literature, the second element of a phrasal verb is referred to as *an adverb, a particle, an adverbial particle, a prepositional adverb, a fixed preposition, a postverb, a postpositive, a postpositive prefix, a postposition*, etc. In the 20th

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century, linguistics referred to the second component of phrasal verbs as the *English adverbial postposition*.

Phrasal verbs can be defined as combinations of monosyllabic verbs with a postpositive adverb (preposition/adverb and preposition) resulting in two-component (and sometimes three-component) lexical and phraseological combinations. Linguists also refer to the postpositive element as the postposition. Postposition is somewhere between an individual word and a morpheme equating it with nouns, adjectives, pronouns, modal verbs, adverbs, particles, prepositions, unions, and interjections.

3. STUDY AND RESULTS

3.1 Methodologically relevant classification of phrasal verbs

For the sake of teaching methodology, it is important to provide students with an understandable and substantial classification of

phrasal verbs. According to the semantic approach, phrasal verbs are usually classified into the following three groups (from the point of view of interpreting their meaning).

1. Non-idiomatic phrasal verbs. In this case, both components of the phrasal verb retain their lexical meaning (e.g. *After you tore off a leaf in the calendar*).

2. Semi-idiomatic phrasal verbs, where the postposition affects the verb's literal meaning (e.g. *His grandmother said that he had the greatest difficulty in beating it off with his umbrella*).

3. Idiomatic phrasal verbs. Here the meaning of the phrasal verb as a whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of its individual components (e.g. *I do not think you should sniff at her advice*).

In addition to the semantic approach, there is a simpler approach to the classification of phrasal verbs.

Type 1: verb (transitive) + preposition. For example, *to get over (an illness)*.

Type 2: verb (transitive) + adverb. For example: *to bring up (the children)*.

Type 3: verb (intransitive) + adverb. For example, *to come about (to happen)*.

Type 4: verb (transitive) + adverb + preposition. For example, *to run out of (sugar)*.

For academic purposes, better understanding and easier memorising, phrasal verbs can be classified in two groups. The first group includes (1) verbs that are used with a preposition and always have the same lexical meaning, as in *to insist on*, *to depend on*, *to rely on*; and (2) verbs that in combination with adverbs or prepositions do not radically change their lexical meaning, and the preposition or adverb is only used to clarify the meaning, as in *to hear – to hear about*, *to hear from*, *to speak – to speak out*.

The second group includes phraseological units which meaning cannot be deduced from their constituent elements. These are the so-called 'permanent context units' that have their own meaning. For example: *The criminals held up the train (i.e. stopped by force to rob) and stole all the passengers' money*. *Held up* cannot be derived from the meaning of the verb *to hold* since it is a set idiomatic phrase (verb + preposition/adverb).

Although the above properties of phrasal verbs can be used to decide whether a given combination is a phrasal verb, none of them are universal. There are always a lot of exceptions and borderline cases in the language, which is not surprising given the huge number of such combinations and their variations. Many scholars agree that it is

impossible to draw a clear line between phrasal verbs, on the one hand, and verbs with 'pure' adverbs and prepositions, on the other.

Having considered a number of characteristics of phrasal verbs as an innate feature of the English language, the study shall turn to some aspects of Business English. First of all, Business English and its functioning are among the most complex, interesting, and relevant areas of research. Studies conducted since the early 1990s have helped overcome reductionism in the interpretation of the concept of Business English by identifying the functional and communicative types of speech, which, by interacting with each other and becoming a single whole, give an idea of the true nature of the English language used for business purposes: socialising for business purposes, telephoning for business purposes, business correspondence, business documents and contracts, the language of business meetings and business media).

3.2 Significance of phrasal verbs for the Business English course

Everything said so far highlights the importance of teaching business communication in a foreign language, which facilitates the establishment by future graduates (today's students majoring in Linguistics) of business contacts with foreign colleagues. The growth of international contacts prompts the need to improve the training of

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professionals whose foreign language competencies approach the native speaker's level. *'Doing business in view of the complex economic and political processes in the world requires specific abilities for sophisticated communication in different communicative registers, especially being in contact with international businessmen'* (Ponomarenko & Malyuga, 2012, p. 4524).

At the same time, developing foreign language skills comparable to those of a native speaker with a university degree requires not only memorising vocabulary units and formal rules of combining them in speech, but also mastering idiomatic English, including phrasal verbs. Skilful use of idioms in the broad sense means understanding the complete semantic structure of the foreign word and its compatibility with other words. Strong idiomatic speech skills, combined with the use and understanding of phrasal verbs, should be taught at all stages of learning. In other words, the

ability to correctly use phrasal verbs in Business English is an important component of effective communication with foreign colleagues. Phrasal verbs are socially significant units of nomination in an English-speaking team, and serve the purposes of categorising the world. They designate the action and clarify it in a concise and clear way. Traditions and dynamics of business communication imply a transition from a more formal (or neutral) style to a less formal one and, vice versa, from informal style (in oral speech) to formal business style in written communication (Ponomarenko & Malyuga, 2015).

Teaching experience indicates that, for students majoring in Linguistics, who take courses in Business English, one of the greatest challenges is the lexical aspect, namely lexical units, characterised by specific semantic and structural properties. Difficulties arise from interlinguistic and intralinguistic interference caused by a discrepancy between the content and the expression of those units – the meanings of individual components do not add up to the semantic integrity inherent in phrasal verbs.

3.3 English phrasal verbs – semantics, teaching methodology and practice

Research conducted in this area has revealed that the following is required in teaching phrasal verbs as part of Business English courses for students majoring in Linguistics:

- authentic material;
- teaching aids that take into account the specifics of teaching business communication to students majoring in Linguistics;
- oral modelling of business communication situations;
- systematisation of the corresponding theoretical concepts;
- monitoring of the learning process.

To successfully develop a methodology for teaching phrasal verbs in a Business English course, it is imperative to design a learning process allowing students to achieve the following:

- 1) regular systematisation of their theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study, acquired through their studies of linguistics;
- 2) gradual introduction of new phrasal verbs to their active and passive vocabulary;
- 3) stimulating the use of phrasal verbs in business communication role-playing games in class.

A necessary element of the instructor's work in this respect is modelling situations of business communication requiring the use of phrasal verbs.

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This method allows students to recreate real-life business communication situations using previously acquired communication skills (Malyuga & Tomalin, 2017).

Another important task facing the instructor is to continuously monitor the learning process by selecting appropriate material and adapting it to the students’ needs. An equally important task is evaluating the effectiveness of the selected material. The instructor should make every effort to ensure that the selected original business-related texts are of interest to the students and motivate them to discuss the content in English.

One of the most effective ways of teaching phrasal verbs is to consider the meaning of their prepositions. This approach can be viewed as an efficient method of teaching phrasal verbs in Business English classes as well. Learners’

attention should be focused on the meaning of the postpositions of phrasal verbs. It is pivotal to clearly understand and remember the meaning of the main postpositions. Consequently, there will be no need to learn the meaning of each individual phrasal verb by heart.

Some prepositions and adverbs are parts of the vast number of phrasal verbs. The most common prepositions are *up*, *out*, *off*, *in*, *on* and *down*. In contrast to these, *aback* and *across* only appear in a few phrasal verbs.

First of all, the teacher should attract students’ attention to the preposition *up* referring to the movement from the bottom up. The general meaning of that preposition can be classified into (1) movement; (2) growth and improvement; (3) attachment and limitations; (4) execution and completion; (5) collection; (6) preparation and beginning; (7) forthcoming; (8) deviation, refuse, concession; (9) detection; (10) breakage and destruction; (11) emergence and establishment; and (12) severance.

Set up – *establish, found, organise*. E.g. *They needed money to set up a special school for gifted children.*

Soften up – *reduce resistance*. E.g. *You go in and soften father up, and then I will ask him for the money.*

Run up against – arrive at a position where positive progress may be blocked. E.g. *The film ran up against strong competition.*

Face up to – accept something difficult or unpleasant and confront it. E.g. *Retirement is something we all have to face up to sooner or later.*

Draw up – arrange, prepare, draw or compose a written document. E.g. *If you agree to the terms, let us draft up your letter of employment now.*

Come up with – create, devise, produce, find. E.g. *This artwork is rubbish! Can't you come up with anything better than that?*

Be up against – to be, or arrive, at a position where positive progress or forward movement is, or may be, blocked. E.g. *Profits have fallen because the company is up against stronger competition than expected.*

To help master phrasal verbs teachers can ask students to provide their own examples from business texts with the same preposition but different meaning.

Another productive preposition in phrasal verbs is the adverb *out*. Its general meaning is *movement outside*. It can be subdivided into (1) departure; (2) appearance; (3) increase; (4) completion; (5) displacement; (6) being outside the home; (7)

completeness; (8) organisation; (9) criticism, protest; (10) search, discovery; (11) reproduction; (12) duration; and (13) support and assistance. The meanings can be illustrated with examples from business discourse.

Be (go) out of action – to not work or operate, to fail to function or to stop working/ operating/ functioning. E.g. *The computer is out of action at the moment, due to an electrical fault.*

Carry out – fulfil, perform, complete, finish successfully. E.g. *The oil company is carrying out geological surveys before drilling begins.*

Iron out – remove problems or difficulties by discussion or action, sort out, put right. E.g. *There are a few matters that need ironing out before we talk about your salary increase.*

Point out – show or indicate; make clear. E.g. *The presenter pointed out to the audience the important features of the new product.*

Smooth out – remove problems or difficulties by discussion or action. E.g. *There are a few matters that need smoothing out before we talk about your salary increase.*

Rule out – forbid or prohibit the possibility. E.g. *The government has ruled out any further support for the industry.*

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Spell it out – make one’s position obvious. E.g. Let me spell it out for you. Deliver the goods by tomorrow or we will cancel the contract.

Try out – test or use for a trial period. E.g. We should try out the new equipment on a limited scale before going into production.

Obviously, students will need to practise translating and paraphrasing the sentences. Very often phrasal verbs are used with the adverb *off*, which means the movement from something or division from something. *Off* can also mean (1) departure; (2) deviation; (3) cancellation; (4) displacement; (5) protection; (6) reduction; (7) barrier; (8) beginning; and (9) completion.

Pull off – carry out successfully. E.g. It takes a lot of skill to put off something like that.

Trigger off – cause or bring about. E.g. He has triggered off all this uproar by his casual remark.

Spark off – cause or bring about. E.g. The

management decision sparked off a series of arguments.

Cut off – stop. E.g. People have been suggesting that we should cut off economic aid.

Lead off – start. E.g. The chairman led off with a financial statement.

Fight off – fight, overcome. E.g. You shouldn’t have to fight off too much competition for the job.

Break off – end suddenly. E.g. The breaking off diplomatic relations between two countries may signal the start of warfare.

Another productive preposition in forming phrasal verbs is *on*. Generally, this adverb means that one thing is situated above the other or one thing is moving to another thing. This meaning can be subdivided into eleven further meanings, namely (1) movement and location; (2) forward movement and development; (3) attack; (4) attachment and addition; (5) action onset and management; (6) connection; (7) continuation of the action; (8) impact, feeling; and (9) detection.

Wait on – to wait before taking a decision. E.g. The company will delay the deal and wait on events.

Decide on – to take a decision. E.g. He decided on a career in the army.

Agree on – to reach agreement about, to accept, to have the same opinion as, to come to the same conclusion. E.g. I am afraid we cannot agree to your offer. The negotiators quickly agreed on the key points.

Base on – to use as a basis, ground, or system of reasoning. E.g. The scientist's calculations were based on the results of his experiments.

Keep an eye on – watch carefully, guard in case of some risk. E.g. We keep a careful eye on share price movements in market sectors where we do business.

Shed light on – give a reason or explanation of something which isn't clear. E.g. The problem isn't as complex as it may seem – this diagram may help shed light on it.

Zero in on – identify and focus on some target. E.g. We need to come up with new products and zero in on new markets if we are to stay ahead of our competition.

The adverb *in* is also one of the most common among phrasal verbs. It has the meaning of moving inward. Traditionally, some additional meanings include (1) movement, entrance, arrival; (2) mixing, inclusion; (3) durable being in some place; (4) penetration; (5) collecting; (6) limitation, prevention; (7) collapse, damage, end; (8) filling; and (9) involvement.

Be in line with – to be in conformity or agreement with. E.g. Your ideas are very interesting, especially as they're very much in line with our own.

Be in touch with – to be in contact, to continue contact. E.g. Although they don't meet very often, they are in constant touch with each other by letter or phone.

Be in the dark – not to know, to be without information. E.g. It's no use asking me about the company's takeover plans – I'm as much in the dark as you are.

Be in the picture – to know, to have information. E.g. Let's go over those points again, to make sure you're completely in the picture, before we go any further.

As far as less frequently used adverbs and prepositions are concerned, words like *aback* and *across* tend to be more limited in use.

Get across – communicate to make clear, to reach. E.g. When making a presentation, you need to decide what ideas or information you want to get across.

Take aback – astonish or disconcert. E.g. His sudden change of opinion took us all aback.

Each preposition can be practised using exercises with assignments such as: *Give the English for*

these Russian business phrases, Paraphrase, Translate from Russian into English, Underline the most suitable preposition in each of the expressions, Fill in the blanks, Complete and translate and so on.

The study of phrasal verbs as part of Business English courses for students majoring in Linguistics is based on two interrelated components – theoretical comprehension and practical assimilation. Theoretical comprehension implies comprehension of the structure, grammatical properties, and semantic relations between the components of the phrasal verb. For this purpose, students can be given research assignments using various corpora of the English language. When working on such assignments, students learn to recognise and isolate phrasal verbs in the text in order to analyse their structure and semantics.

Practical assimilation, as a rule, is based on the language content to be studied at a given stage of the course. For example, language content may include economic texts and articles where phrasal verbs rarely acquire a narrow, special meaning, which is why their meanings in economic texts are very diverse. In general, business texts and articles containing English phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions enrich the students' vocabulary and help recognise and use phrasal verbs in various registers of business communication such as meetings, presentations, negotiations and

'Theoretical comprehension implies comprehension of the structure, grammatical properties, and semantic relations between the components of the phrasal verb'

telephone conversations.

In selecting lexical units, both the thematic principle and the principle of semantic value should be followed. It is desirable to select original texts that have a coherent sequence of oral or written statements characteristic of a specific business communication scenario. The phrasal verbs contained in such texts should have adequate communicative value and meet the criteria of frequency of use and stylistic adequacy. The meaning of the new phrasal verbs is interpreted through the situation modelled in the proposed content, through the semantics of the phrasal verb components, and by other language descriptors, such as synonyms, antonyms, metaphors and definitions.

Since phrasal verbs are quite common in the English language, one of the recommendations to students is to memorise the meaning of postpositions, i.e. how the postposition modifies the meaning of the verb by becoming attached to it.

1. *Back* indicates the response: *You should call him back when you come home.*

2. *Away* denotes distancing, movement away from the object or person: *He is going away in a month. Don't run away. We need to talk to you.*

3. *Down* means weakening, decreasing quantity, deterioration, decreasing strength: *Our partners refused to bring down the price.*

4. *On* – continued or progressing action: *The conference went on until eight o'clock.*

5. *Over* – *consider*: *They need more time to think it over. I hope we'll talk it over after breakfast.*

It is advisable to develop the lexical skills of using phrasal verbs in view of the challenges posed by this specific vocabulary and typical usage mistakes made by students taking Business English courses. The phrasal verbs to be learned should be carefully selected. Topics and situations of business communication included in the programme of the respective course stage could be used as guidance, and original business texts serving the goal of helping the students in developing communicative competencies could be used as the source. Some scholars believe that the thematic selection principle should not be adopted as the key criterion because of the difficulties encountered in linking phrasal verbs to

a particular topic of Business English training. However, textbooks are available where phrasal verbs are systematised into topics, including business communication topics. Phrasal verbs included in such textbooks have a high frequency of use, both in oral and written speech. In addition, they feature multiple exercises helping transfer phrasal verbs from passive to active vocabulary through thematic texts accompanied by practice exercises.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching business communication in English to students majoring in Linguistics is an important challenge. The effectiveness of mastering phrasal verbs as part of a Business English course depends on the following conditions.

1. Identifying the difficulties of mastering phrasal verbs, bearing in mind their linguistic characteristics and typical mistakes made by students.
2. Selecting phrasal verbs relevant to the scope, topics, and business communication situations featured in the given stage of the study course.
3. Developing lexical skills in how to research and use phrasal verbs in spoken business communication.
4. Developing a teaching methodology for phrasal

verbs and monitoring its effectiveness in the learning process.

5. Using authentic materials to develop the skills of understanding phrasal verbs in specific business situations and building students' communicative competencies.

Raising students' awareness of phrasal verbs as a highly productive, dynamic, and semantically rich group of English verbs is a big step towards

achieving the main goal of any Business English course, i.e. enhancing rhetorical effectiveness of business English discourse among EFL students. Learning more about the semantics of numerous phrasal verbs, drilling them in multiple business-related contexts in both spoken and written interaction helps students not only memorise these lexical units, but also understand their functional significance, stylistic colouring and patterns of efficiency in solving communicative tasks which are essential for business and professional life.

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