

Teaching Tips: Phrasal Verbs: For Beginners Only

T. NEVIN SIDERS V.

There is a popular myth among English teachers here in Mexico that phrasal verbs are very complicated and, therefore, are only for advanced students of the language. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, they are our simplest verb forms--at least from our point of view! Moreover, children rarely use any other verb form until they reach the second or third year of elementary school.

Phrasal verbs are an intimate, solid foundation of all Germanic languages, but perhaps even more so in English than in the others. One cannot understand English without them, and moreover, will find much of the rest of the language confusing until these constructions are assimilated.

We, as teachers, therefore do a great academic disservice to any student we deprive of this knowledge--and doubly so because there are easy and excellent ways to present phrasal verbs beginning the very first week of classes!

After the students have two or three hours of classes and are beginning to grasp the verb *be* well, simply lift a pen, pencil or book and ask "What am I doing?" (no, they may well not understand the word *doing* now, but they will in just a moment because you are going to repeat it so often). Count on the few who do know the word *doing* to answer in their fashion.

Then say "I am picking up the book." Model again with two or three other objects - perform the action very, very slowly while the students repeat each time "You are / The teacher is picking up the book." Then, naturally, the students perform it too. So far, this has taken only a minute or two.

Next, the students tell each other what things to lift: "Laura, pick up the book." The student performs the action and states what he/she is doing, and others restate (Insist they move slowly while others are restating the action). Again, this is a practice activity that takes only two to five minutes.

Constantly interrupt to ask third students “What is he saying?” The answer is with the same form, “He is saying she is taking the pen off the brown chair.” Then a fourth student states what the third said, “He is saying he is saying she is taking...”; and even a chain with fifth and sixth students is possible.

Then, the students tell the teacher or other students (with their backs turned, behind a curtain or outside the door) what is happening: “Laura is picking up the piece of paper.” “She is putting the eraser on the table.” “What is she picking up?” “Where is she putting the chair?”

This third phase, where the students cannot see each other, would also be ideal as a communicative “test” for the first two weeks. They can have a lot of fun placing chairs on tables and hiding cassettes under handbags.

And then, repeat and extend the concept over the course of two or three classes by presenting several other phrasal verbs. Use dynamic words that can be immediately performed: pick up, put down, stand up, sit down, put on, take off, put into, take out of, go into, come out of, turn around.

What Have They Learned?

Now, let us analyze what has been taught. The students have practiced several crucial structures in a very fun lesson. Grammatically, they have learned to name things and actions, they have practiced the present progressive and they have learned an imperative, half of the “wh- question words” and one form of reported speech. Affectively, and in relation to learning styles, they have learned kinesthetically. Conveniently, this list has mostly opposites, so they can do and undo things repeatedly.

Your students have strongly reinforced the phrasal verbs, laying a basis for understanding and communicating in English in a way and length of time that is absolutely impossible in any textbook I have seen to date. (They all spend many chapters simply naming objects and abstractly describing the things they like.)

Later on when you get to a presentation on prepositions, whether in later chapters of this first course or to Proficiency-level students, the students will now have a very strong background upon which to judge for themselves the basic meanings of several prepositions, and can also grasp the concept of the way English (and Germanic languages in general) uses

propositions to distinguish motion and location (for example, on / in, onto / into), and therefore be much better equipped to understand an explicit comparison-and-contrast with the preposition system of Romance languages, which tends to emphasize the contrast between origin and means or method (*por / para, de / por*).

The way to present this latter point with your students is not to open an esoteric lecture on linguistics (as in my last paragraph), but to simply ask them, children or adults, “How many verbs do you know with up?” They will hopefully answer with pick up, stand up, etc. List them on the chalkboard. The teacher can then follow up with any other preposition necessary, and the students will quite naturally begin to notice contrasts with their mother tongue.

There is one aspect to this exercise that is quite different from the presentations in textbooks that I know of: textbooks present phrasal verbs by asking the students to make lists based on the verbs they know, not the prepositions. The task becomes simply listing unrelated vocabulary items. There is little obvious relationship between drive up and drive through, because they can both mean to arrive at and also by means of. Yet if the student's list includes drive up, get up, come up, go up, continue up, push up, then this double meaning becomes obvious (or at least more obvious), and the exercise has some cohesion, it is linked through meaning.

There are certain activities that advanced students can do to help understand these constructions, also. First, I feel that they should perform some of them, just like the beginners do, but more briefly, of course. Then the teacher should ask, “who,” “what” and “where” those actions happen. The students should make lists based on the preposition, as explained above, and then think of their synonyms. Finally, they can legitimately create their own new phrasal verbs because this is one of the principal ways that new words are invented in English, a preposition is attached to a verb.

Phrasal Verbs Are Not Idioms

The final point to make about phrasal verbs before signing off is that they are very, very different from idioms. Most of the exercise books that I have observed do not distinguish between these two items, in fact they are placed side-by-side as if they were the same species.

An idiom is a group of words that has one, unique, special meaning, a meaning which is quite distinct from the literal meaning of the individual words, and which was created at some point in the history of that culture and society (and usually they are humorous). A phrasal verb can have many meanings (we have seen some examples), but all of these meanings will be derived from the actual meanings of the constituent words.

Grammatically speaking, an idiom is a set phrase similar to a noun, in so far as it is almost impossible to break, modify or conjugate. (An idiom may well contain a verb, but it is a fixed phrase.) A phrasal verb can perform all of these grammatical functions and more. In particular, most can be transformed into nouns without changing their form. It is possible to distinguish authentic phrasal verbs from other two- three- and four-word verbs by two special characteristics: the intonation or stress falls on the preposition, and they typically have a synonym that is just one word (*pick up / lift; go out of / leave*).

By way of credits, the ideas presented here are my eclectic conclusions based on teacher training at Ohio State University, orientation courses at Mexico City language institutes, and MEXTESOL workshops given by John Shea. Although my own pedagogical principles are founded on cognitive and developmental psychologies, the techniques themselves are not very modern. More than anything else, these are creative applications of the “direct” and audio-lingual methodologies. Yes, that's right: audio-lingual! What is overlooked these days is that “listen and repeat” is a perfectly logical and appropriate strategy for beginners. It works.

References

- Orientation classes. 1990. Berlitz de Mexico.
- Shea, John. 1993. “Some Practical Ideas on the Teaching of Phrasal Verbs.” Workshop at MEXTESOL Mexico City Regional Convention.
- Siders V., T. Nevin. 1993. “Color Idioms.” Workshop at MEXTESOL Saturday Academic Session, January 1993 and MEXTESOL National Convention, October 1993.