

Vocabulary in the ESL Classroom: An Activity on Phrasal Verbs

by [*Marina McLaughlin*](#) and [*Abby Liu*](#)

Learning a word well is similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Learners gain new knowledge of a word by gathering pieces of information each time they encounter a term during a written or oral context, gradually making the puzzle picture a little more complete. When learners have meaningful exposure to the target language through communicative practice, it allows them to find the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Often, learners who do not have phrasal verbs in their native languages, such as Spanish and Chinese, tend to avoid using phrasal verbs during communication (Chen, 2007). Phrasal verbs are regularly used in a colloquial register by native English speakers, meaning they are most often used outside of the classroom. Therefore, the importance of phrasal verbs may not be as apparent in an ESL setting, where more formal registers take place. However, in the ESL context, using and understanding phrasal verbs, their meanings, and their registers is imperative: On average, one phrasal verb occurs per 150 English words encountered (Gardner & Davies, 2007).

An Activity on Phrasal Verbs

This activity, for intermediate ESL students, provides an opportunity for meaningful communication using phrasal verbs in both formal and informal registers and contexts by emphasizing a vocabulary teaching strategy that calls for learners to repeat the target phrasal verbs. Also, the activity allows learners to use phrasal verbs communicatively by providing relevant real-life situations. This process allows learners to apply the target phrasal verbs to situations they may have familiarity with or have encountered. Through this recycling process, students not only increase the number of encounters with the given vocabulary words, but they will also find the missing pieces to their vocabulary puzzles.

Preparation

To prepare for this lesson, you should introduce students to phrasal verbs, their meanings, and various tenses. This activity targets nine specific phrasal verbs in present tense (see Table 1). Cover these nine verbs in addition to any others you'd like your students to know. Following the introduction and teaching of phrasal verbs, introduce their formal counterparts in the same manner. It is important to keep in mind that some phrasal verbs do not have a formal counterpart because they can be utilized in both a formal and informal setting.

Table 1. Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal Verbs (Informal Register)	Example	Counterparts (Formal Register)
ramble on	My coworker often <u>rambles/goes</u> on about meaningless topics.	go on
butt in	I hate to <u>butt/step</u> in on two people's conversations.	step in
blurt out	During meetings I often <u>blurt/speak</u> out ideas.	speak out
shut up	I often wish my coworkers would just <u>shut up/be quiet</u> .	be quiet
get along with	It's nice to <u>get along with</u> your work mates.	get along with
care for	I don't <u>care for/appreciate</u> bad behavior.	appreciate
come off	She <u>comes off/appears</u> happy but she is really upset.	appear
go off on	I won't <u>go off on/scold</u> you if you do your work correctly.	to scold
run out	I <u>run out</u> of ideas quickly when I'm tired.	run out

After presenting and providing examples to learners of the target phrasal verbs, follow up with a controlled, then guided activity (e.g., matching or cloze vocabulary practice). Then, implement the following communicative activity, adapted from Zimmerman (2009, pp. 107–108). In this activity, students will use suggested scenarios with recommended phrasal verbs in order to produce language in both formal and informal registers.

Materials

- A list of 9 phrasal verbs and their formal counterparts
- 9 hypothetical scenarios and 1 sample scenario

Procedure

1. Review the phrasal verbs listed in Table 1. Write the verbs and their formal counterparts on the board or provide them in a handout for students to access during the activity. If you wish to make this activity more challenging, you can review the phrasal verbs but not provide a list for referencing.
2. Demonstrate the activity to learners with the sample scenarios (See [Appendix](#)).
3. Place learners into pairs and provide each pair one of the created hypothetical scenarios. Learners take turns retelling the scenarios in the informal register to a classmate by pretending they are speaking to a coworker or friend and incorporating the target phrasal verbs.
4. Learners then retell the given scenarios in a formal register by pretending they are speaking to a manager or supervisor.
5. Conclude the activity by having learners volunteer to demonstrate their dialogues.

Sample Scenario

Working as a Packer

You don't like your coworker because he talks a lot. This situation makes it difficult for you to concentrate on your work. You don't enjoy working with him and you don't want to listen to him talking anymore. Therefore, you complain to:

1. a friend of yours
2. your supervisor

Recommended phrasal verbs: *ramble on, care for, shut up*

Formal Counterparts: *go on, appreciate, be quiet*

1. Informal Register: Suggested Answer

I don't like my coworker because he talks to me while I am doing my work. He rambles on about things that have nothing to do with our job. I am tired of this, and don't care for his stories. I wish he would just shut up.

2. Formal Register: Suggested Answer

I don't like my coworker because he talks to me while I am doing my work. He goes on about things that have nothing to do with our job. I am tired of this, and don't appreciate his stories. I wish he would just be quiet.

Postlesson Suggestion

Recall this lesson to students, but present the past tense forms of the phrasal verbs and their formal counterparts. Then ask the learners to convert the present tense forms of the given phrasal verbs they used in the activity to past tense. Have learners repeat steps two to three in the Procedure section of this activity, approaching the scenarios as past events. Finally, learners should report their dialogues to the teacher.

Lesson Adaptations

Adapting for Different Levels

Adapt this lesson for more advanced learners by presenting a longer list of phrasal verbs. They can utilize this lesson as a guide to lead into more communicative practice.

Adapting for Different Contexts

Have learners complete this activity to gain a sense of what is expected, and then ask them to provide their own, more personally relevant scenarios. For example, a learner who does not work in the United States may find him- or herself in work situations with different social etiquette. A stay-at-home mother or father might utilize phrasal verbs to report a parent-teacher meeting.

References

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Marina McLaughlin graduated from Cal State Fullerton with an MS Ed, TESOL, and is currently an instructor at a noncredit ESL program at Mount San Antonio College in Walnut, California, USA.

Abby Liu is a Cal State Fullerton MS Ed TESOL graduate who is currently helping her family run their private English school, Pon Pon Forest Kindergarten, in Taiwan.