



Teaching and Learning Multiword Expressions

by [Eli Hinkel](#) and [Brent A. Green](#)

Multiword expressions are combinations of words that frequently occur and reoccur together in discourse and text of any kind. These can be laborious for multilingual learners to learn and use correctly because they consist of two or more component parts. Some examples of multiword expressions: *from time to time, traffic light, give out, hand out, call out, on the other hand, have for lunch, take a walk, open up, close down, in any case, just in case.*

There are more than 40 terms that refer to these expressions (and more according to some counts). Some examples include multiword units, chunks, collocations, phrases, idioms, expressions, formulaic sequences, formulaic language, prefabricated constructions, and lexical bundles. All these are included in the blanket term *multiword expressions*.

Multiword expressions can be taught at practically any language proficiency level, and they can be found in any type of language use. Some phrases can be rigid and inflexible, and these do not allow much room for variation (e.g., *few and far between, get a handle on, thank you, out of luck, out of the park, out and about, in a pickle*). Others can be variable and thus permit component substitutions. Here are some examples:

- the [purpose/aim/goal] of this [paper/essay/study]
- a careful [examination/analysis/discussion]
- see you [tomorrow/later/next week/at the xxx/on the other side]
- an important [aspect/point/issue/consideration]

Teaching multiword expressions can be relevant anywhere in the world and in any learning context. The pointers covered here include the following:

- teaching and learning multiword expressions explicitly
- effective and ineffective classroom teaching techniques
- using a corpus-based approach for teaching

The Biggest Knots

1. Unpredictability and Irregularity

Many recurrent word combinations can have unpredictable meanings and grammatically irregular structures. These expressions cannot be derived and formed according to grammar rules or formed on the fly (this is a multiword expression) in the process of communication.

Noticing their occurrences and components is very important for learners to increase their linguistic repertoire, fluency, and proficiency. Most proficient first language and second language users attain their facility with hundreds and thousands of phrases over time and through encountering them in all manner of interactions, reading, and writing (Hinkel, 2019, 2023; Nation, 2022).

2. Identifying Prevalence

One of the key issues with multiword phrases is that they are extremely frequent. 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.

However, without explicit instruction, most language learners cannot always identify the occurrence or prevalence of multiword units in either spoken or written English and, in part for this reason, have restricted opportunities of learning how and when to deploy them in language comprehension or production.

Effective and Practical Teaching Strategies

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). In this, the teacher’s guidance is essential.

In general terms, a few key factors lead to any type of vocabulary learning and language gains, be it single-word or multilingual expressions:

- repeated encounters
- spaced repetition and review at regular intervals (review, review, review)
- purposeful and deliberate attention, work, and practice (and practice)

Indeed, for adult learners, a strong and significant learning advantage can be obtained with at least 10 to 15 repeated exposures and follow-ups.

Ineffective Teaching Techniques

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.

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 limited usage in production.
- 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, 2019; Nation, 2022).
- Providing insufficient review and too few repeated exposures represents one of the most pervasive ineffective instructional strategies.

Discovery Tasks: Searching for Patterns

Though there is an abundance of resources for second language vocabulary and grammar teaching and learning practices found in the literature, one approach for multiword expressions is to engage learners in corpus-based learning tasks. Corpus-based learning incorporates a natural inductive approach to vocabulary and grammar learning. In this approach, learners are shown lines of text and asked to “discover” and then later describe the patterns they see. This approach taps into something that humans have evolved to become quite good at, which is the ability to detect patterns and then apply them to new situations (see Boulton, 2007).

This approach is a significant departure from the older, traditional notion that rules should be presented, practiced, and then produced. We are now asking students to observe language data, look for patterns, formulate a hypothesis, and then apply newly formed understandings in their language production.

Following, we describe a few corpus-based activities that we ask our students to do as they work on acquiring multiword forms in our academic English program.

Vocabulary Worksheet

1. Examine course texts and pull out key academic vocabulary words in their original contexts and paste them into a worksheet (see [Appendix A](#) for an example).
2. Next, ask the students to complete a number of corpus-based tasks using an academic web-based corpus. (We use the [Corpus of Contemporary American English](#) [COCA] because of its relative ease of use.) You may need to create videos to show them how to complete the worksheet. Each task has a response column in the worksheet. For example, they look for and write down

- frequent words before and after the target word,
 - the part of speech,
 - other forms of the words,
 - synonyms,
 - a definition, and
 - clusters (words that cluster one, two, and three positions left and right of the word).
3. The final task requires the students to use the information they have been discovering to write an academic sentence of their own with an emphasis on including frequent words before or after and/or clusters in their own sentences.
 4. You can then check their accuracy of use by looking for the target vocabulary with acceptable multiword forms in students' oral presentations and written assignments. We usually require they use at least five of the target words in each class larger production assignment.

Speaking Practice With Multiword Expressions

Another approach to teaching multiword expressions via corpora is to point out how words are linked in grammatical constructions. For example, in speaking classes, we can explain how thought groups or intonation units (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010) typically occur as multiword forms. In the table, we can see examples of how thought groups form semantically and grammatically coherent multiword units of discourse. Teachers can create a worksheet (see [Appendix B](#)) that requires students to explore these patterns in corpus data and practice using them by asking them to write and then perform conversations which contain these forms.

Table. Common Grammatical Forms in Thought Groups

Article + adjective + noun	the other hand, the present study, the United Nations, a wide range, a great deal
Article + noun + verb	the results indicated, the court held, the authors declared, the study reported
Preposition + article + noun	in the context, in the graph, on the basis, in the study, of the students
Relative pronoun + noun + verb	which students learn, which individuals experience, whose parents reported, that people want
Subordinating conjunction + noun + verb	because people know, as children develop, after researchers applied, as evidence suggests
Verb + adverb	carried out, described above
Verb + direct object + preposition + indirect object	hand it to him, reminds us of her, prepares them for careers
Verb + object	make sense, eat lunch, solve problems, anticipate errors

Conclusion

Teaching learners to examine larger pieces of discourse broken into thought groups along semantic and grammatical categories can raise consciousness about multiword patterns and their uses as they occur in spoken and written language.

Overall, we have found corpus-based activities to be quite useful in helping facilitate the acquisition of multiword expressions in our classrooms. Our hope is that teachers can tap into corpus tools available to help their learners examine the multiword patterns that are used in their spoken and written interactions in various settings with others and begin using them correctly in their own spoken and written discourse.

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Appendix A: Academic Vocabulary List 1

Name: _____

Instructions: Select words from our text that you would like to study (delete the rows you won't be using). Underline the word in its original context. Search the [Corpus of Contemporary American English \(COCA\)](#) to discover the most frequently occurring words before and after your chosen word. Write in the part of speech and other forms of the word, and synonyms (words that have similar meanings). Look for the definition and write it in the definition box. Find the part that lists the word with multiword clusters to the left and right and put a few down in the "Clusters" column. Finally, write your own academic sentence using the word and frequent words before or after or words that cluster around your target word and underline that word in your sentence. The first word is completed for you as an example. Note that the words from the "Frequent words before and after" column are highlighted in the example sentence. Here is a [video](#) for you to follow if you get stuck.

	Word	Context	Frequent Words before and after	Part of Speech	Other forms of the word	Synonyms	Definition	Clusters	Sentence
Example	employ	Hunting and gathering food is a survival strategy that scientists believe humans began to <u>employ</u> some 1.8 million years ago.	method strategy experimental	verb	employed (adj)	Engage, utilize, use	put into service	Employed by, employed in, have been employed	The methods <u>employed in</u> the experimental design proved to be quite successful in discovering the cure.
1	transition	Then around 10,000 years ago, a major transition occurred: People learned how to grow crops and domesticate animals.							
2	isolated	However, there is a group of people in an isolated region of northern Tanzania that rejects the agricultural way of life.							
3	insist on	They still insist on hunting animals and gathering food.							
4	preservation	This group, the Hadza people, has lived in the Great Rift Valley for 10,000 years, and the preservation of their ancient ways is a priority for them.							

Appendix B: Speaking Practice With Multiword Expressions

Instructions: Use the [Corpus of Contemporary American English](#) (COCA) to help you complete the tasks below.

1. Select one language pattern from the list below.

Article + adjective + noun	<i>the present study</i>
Article + noun + verb	<i>the results indicated</i>
Preposition + article + noun	<i>in the context</i>
Relative pronoun + noun + verb	<i>which students learn</i>

2. Go to COCA and type that pattern into the search box. Write the 3 most frequent forms for academic texts in the space provided below. Include the number of times each one occurs in the corpus.

	Frequent form	# of times it occurs in the corpus
Example	<i>any given time</i>	117
1		
2		
3		

3. Click on the multiword expression to see how the phrase occurs in real world language. What do you notice about the forms? What types of contexts do they occur in? Why do you think they occur most frequently in academic texts? What other patterns, if any, do you notice?

[illegible]

4. Consider when the phrase(s) might be used. Generate a dialog which includes one or more of the phrases you studied. Write at least four exchanges between two or more individuals.