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Phrasal Verbs: Tips for ESL Learners

Written by:

Dr. Rafidah Kamarudin

Dr. Amalia Qistina Castañeda Abdullah

Mazliyana Zainal Arifin

Nur'Ain Zuraimi

"Carried out an experiment" or "performed an experiment"? "The writers *emphasise*" or "The writers *point out*"? Despite this language feature's common and frequent use in written and spoken discourse, many find it difficult to decide whether to use a phrasal verb or its one-word counterpart. The struggle to use this language form is even greater among English language learners. There are some useful and helpful tips to help language learners understand and utilise this language form.

Undeniably, most phrasal verbs tend to have an informal style or a more casual tone. For instance, phrasal verbs like "show off," "give up," or "hang out." However, it is **not right to assume that a single verb is always better than phrasal verbs**, as there are cases in which phrasal verbs are much more appropriate than their one-word counterparts. For instance, '*the teacher **found out** about the student's strange behaviour* instead of '*the teacher **discovered** about the student's strange behaviour*' or '*the car **sped up***' instead of '*the car **accelerated***'. Thus, it is

important to note that the context of use plays a crucial role when deciding whether to use a phrasal verb or a single-word verb.

It is also **incorrect to assume that all phrasal verbs can only be used in an informal setting**. For instance, "look into," "come up with," "carry out," and "point out" are examples of phrasal verbs that frequently appear in papers and are generally accepted in academic literature in expressing a particular idea. Below are instances in academic papers where phrasal verbs are more frequently used than one verb equivalent.

a) To describe a goal or protocol:

'We *carry out* a project,' 'We *set up* a model,'

'We *follow up* with the patient,'
'Participant *fill out* a questionnaire'

b) To report numerical data:

'which *make up* percentage,'
'which *slow down* rate'

c) to interpret results and draw conclusions

'we *rule out* possibility/effect,'
'this *open up* possibility,' etc.



It is also important to remember that **phrasal verbs are polysemous or have multiple meanings. Thus**, it is advisable for language learners to always refer to a dictionary and check each definition thoroughly. Even though you have seen a phrasal verb used in many texts before, never assume that you know all the meanings **a phrasal may have**. By checking a dictionary, you will become aware of the possible connotations and nuances of each meaning and possible differences between the phrasal verb and its one-word equivalent. A good dictionary will also inform learners whether a particular phrasal verb belongs in an informal or formal setting.

In short, for learners to avoid using phrasal verbs in everyday situations, be it in written or spoken discourse, is a mistake. Their ability to use this language feature reflects their proficiency and maturity. Thus, it is the role of teachers to expose language learners to this important language form at the very early stage of their language learning.

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