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Secondary school students' attitudes to phrasal verbs

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs are an essential, though difficult to teach and learn, part of the English language. Although phrasal verbs are commonly used by native speakers, for English learners they pose a considerable challenge as far as their acquisition and use are concerned. The aim of this study is to examine students' attitude towards phrasal verbs taught at the B2 level in upper-secondary schools, and to analyse the significance of these multi-word verbs. The paper presents an excerpt of a survey conducted among secondary school students, which examined their understanding of phrasal verbs and analysed students' opinions about the importance of acquiring these demanding multi-word verbs.

Keywords

phrasal verbs, survey, secondary school students

Podejście uczniów szkół średnich do czasowników frazowych

Abstrakt

Czasowniki frazowe stanowią istotną część języka angielskiego, która przysparza wiele kłopotów w procesie ich nauczania i uczenia się. Choć czasowniki frazowe są powszechnie używane przez rodzimych użytkowników języka angielskiego, dla osób uczących się tego języka, zagadnienie przyswojenia sobie szczegółów funkcjonowania tych czasowników jest skomplikowane. Celem niniejszej pracy jest zbadanie podejścia uczniów do czasowników frazowych nauczanych na poziomie B2 w szkołach średnich. Praca ta przedstawia fragment ankiety przeprowadzonej wśród uczniów szkół średnich i analizuje zrozumienie pojęcia czasowników frazowych oraz ich istotę w odniesieniu do posiadanych przez uczniów kompetencji językowych w zakresie języka angielskiego.

Słowa kluczowe

czasowniki frazowe, ankieta, uczniowie szkół średnich

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs are a vital part of the English language. Having a good knowledge of them means being familiar with the English language itself. As Glennis Pye (1996: 697) claims, “the most fluent speaker can be identified as a non-native speaker through their use of phrasal verbs”. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce phrasal verbs to students and to familiarize them with multi-word verbs. There are several approaches to teaching phrasal verbs.

The traditional approach focuses on the selection of phrasal verbs which are supposed to be taught by grouping them together according to the base verb (Side 1990: 144). Such tasks for mastering the acquisition of phrasal verbs can be found in almost every grammar/vocabulary book or coursebook. For

example, in Sue O'Connell's *Focus on First Certificate* (1987: 27) there is a list of phrasal verbs based on a common verb, together with their definitions and examples of sentences where the multi-word verbs are used. The students' task is to learn all the given phrasal verbs by heart. However, some linguists, such as Darwin and Gray (1999) and Gardner and Davis (2007), have criticized book presentations of phrasal verbs in which lists of phrasal verbs are usually followed by matching or gap-filling exercises. What White (2012: 420) has underlined is that "plain memorisation is what is expected of learners rather than any kind of semantic analysis".

This is why linguists and ELT specialists have been considering different ways to improve the techniques of introducing and teaching phrasal verbs to students using the semantic criteria. In doing so, they have made use of the research of cognitive grammarians, such as Lindner (1981), Lakoff (1987) and Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) all of whom indicated particles as the units which convey the meaning of a single phrasal verb. Thus, an approach to teaching phrasal verbs through particles has appeared. Particle-oriented teaching of phrasal verbs seems to facilitate and enhance the process of learning these multi-word verbs since their acquisition is conducted in a meaningful way. Another form of introducing and teaching phrasal verbs using meaningful criteria is the organization of phrasal verbs around common themes such as family, health or job. The context in which phrasal verbs are presented and taught has been introduced as being of paramount importance and underlined as the factor that also facilitates the process of mastering multi-word verbs by "demonstrating their syntactic behaviour [by] providing meaningful context, exposure and recycling" (Thornbury 2002: 125). ELT specialists have used this knowledge and have introduced books where phrasal verbs are placed in contextualized ambience. One such author is Acklam (1992) who presented and then enabled students to practise phrasal verbs in a variety of related contexts. A combination of all of the approaches is offered by Flower (1993) and Heaton (1995) who, in their books, provide a number of phrasal verb exercises that are classified

by verb, by particle and by topic. Thus, English learners have been supplied with various tools that may enable them to learn and to practise phrasal verbs.

In order to obtain information about students' attitudes towards phrasal verbs and their knowledge of the multi-word verbs, I designed a survey for the students of Gdańsk's upper secondary schools who are learning English at the upper-intermediate level. In this article, I present an excerpt of the research results and I focus on the first four questions of the survey. The aim of this article is to provide information on the students' ability to give a proper definition of phrasal verbs, the learners' indication of the significance of phrasal verb knowledge and the reasons for the importance or unimportance of phrasal verbs.

2. Participants

Students of upper secondary schools in Gdańsk participated in the survey. The survey was conducted in 6 upper secondary schools in Gdańsk with a total number of 550 students who are learning English at the upper-intermediate level.

The schools and the number of students who filled in the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants and their schools

Schools in Gdańsk	Number of students	Percentage
Upper Secondary School No. II	82	15
Upper Secondary School No. III	81	15
Upper Secondary School No. V	214	39
Upper Secondary School No. VIII	62	11
Upper Secondary School No. IX	85	15
Upper Secondary School No. XV	26	5
Total	550	100

As is shown in Table 1, the smallest group of students comes from Upper Secondary School No. XV (26 students), which is only 5 % of all the surveyed students, and the biggest group of students comes from Upper Secondary School No. V (214 students), a group which constitutes almost 40 % of all the surveyed students. The differentiated numbers of students in each school stems from different levels of English. There are schools where only one class is taught at the upper-intermediate (B2) level (Upper Secondary School No. XV) and there are schools where there are numerous groups with English taught at B2 level (Upper Secondary Schools No. II, III, VIII, IX). In these schools, the numbers of students range from 62 to 85, which constitutes from 11 % to 15 % of all the students who participated in the survey. However, at Upper Secondary School No. III there are more classes where English is taught at this level, but only some of the students participated in the questionnaire. Additionally, Upper Secondary School No. V is the school with the most classes of B2 English.

As regards the gender distribution, 324 (59 %) were girls and 226 (41 %) were boys. All of them were either 1st or 2nd grade students at the time that the questionnaire was conducted.

271 of the students were at the end of the 1st grade and 279 were at the end of the 2nd grade. There was also a question about the amount of time the students had studied English (see Table 2).

From the data presented in Table 2, it can be observed that the scope of the length of learning English among the students of upper secondary schools is very wide, which indicates that they began learning English at different ages. Some started from kindergarten, which results in 13 to 15 years of learning English, and others started in the lower secondary school, which results in 4 or 5 years of learning English. Over 50 % of all the students (288) have been learning English for 10 or 11 years, which shows that they are experienced learners of the language.

Table 2
Length of learning English language

Length of learning English	Number of students	Percentage
4 years	1	0.2
5 years	3	0.6
6 years	6	1
7 years	22	4
8 years	32	6
9 years	48	9
10 years	149	27
11 years	139	25
12 years	95	17
13 years	31	6
14 years	17	3
15 years	7	1.2
Total	550	100

3. Questionnaire

The students were provided with a questionnaire in Polish concerning phrasal verbs. The students were asked to give a definition of phrasal verbs and then to indicate how important the knowledge of phrasal verbs was. Depending on their answers, the students were requested to state the reasons for either the importance or unimportance of phrasal verbs.

The questionnaire which the students filled in is presented in Appendix 1 and its English translation in Appendix 2.

4. Results

4.1. Question 1

At the beginning, the students were asked to provide a definition of phrasal verbs. Out of 550 students, 507 (92 %) presented their definitions of phrasal verbs and 41 (7 %) did not. Their

answers have been grouped into 5 categories. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Definitions of phrasal verbs given by the respondents

Definitions of phrasal verbs	Number of students	Percentage
Phrases which consist of two words (a verb and a particle/ preposition) and which mean something different from the meanings of the particular words	241	44
Phrases which consist of two words (a verb and a particle/ preposition)	169	31
Phrases which mean something different from the particular words included in them	72	13
No definitione	41	7
Other definitions	27	5
Total	550	100

The results show that nearly half of the students (44 %) gave an adequate definition of phrasal verbs by focusing on the two most significant aspects: first that they usually consist of two words (a verb and a particle) and second that they have a meaning different from the meanings of the separate words. Despite the lack of knowledge of linguistic terminology, these 241 students gave an adequate and relatively precise definition of phrasal verbs, which shows that they understood what phrasal verbs were.

The next two groups provided partial definitions of phrasal verbs focusing on two different aspects of the multi-word verbs. 169 students (31 %) explained that these are phrases usually consisting of two different words (a verb and particle or a preposition), whereas 72 students (13 %) focused on the different meanings. 41 students (7 %) did not give any answer and 27

students (5 %) provided other definitions of phrasal verbs.

Those who did not offer any definition of phrasal verbs, either left a blank space or wrote an explanation that they do not know what the expression means. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
No phrasal verb definition

No definition of phrasal verbs	Number of students	Percentage
blank space	34	83
"I don't know"	5	12
"I don't remember"	1	2.5
"It's hard to explain"	1	2.5
Total	41	100

From the above figures, 34 out of 41 surveyed students (83 %) did not write any definition and left a blank space. This may not stem from the students' lack of concept knowledge, but rather from the lack of linguistic terminology knowledge. The reason could be the students' problems with defining abstract terms. Five students (12 %) directly wrote that they do not know what phrasal verbs are, one student wrote that he or she "did not remember" and another wrote that phrasal verbs "are hard to explain".

Taking the length of time spent learning English into consideration, it might appear astounding that seven students could not provide a simple definition of phrasal verbs. Since most students have been learning the language for over six years, they must have encountered phrasal verbs many times in their education and, it can be assumed, they should be able to explain, using simple words, what they are.

The least numerous group (27 respondents) are those who gave other definitions of phrasal verbs. The information they gave is true but their explanations do not include important features of phrasal verbs. The students' answers are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Other explanations of phrasal verbs given by the respondents

Other explanations of phrasal verbs	Number of students	Percentage
Expressions used in colloquial language	12	44
Verbs that cannot be translated directly into Polish	4	15
Informal replacement of formal words	2	7.5
Colloquial expressions which facilitate communication	2	7.5
Verbal expressions which describe actions easily and generally more precisely than ordinary verbs	2	7.5
Part of the lexicon	1	3.7
Verbs used daily which enrich the lexicon	1	3.7
Figurative expressions	1	3.7
Words used together that do not have a logical explanation	1	3.7
Expressions that are drudgery to learn	1	3.7
Total	27	100

Most of the answers presented above provide a vague description of what phrasal verbs are. They contain accurate observations, but do not define what these verbs are. The last two explanations are slightly different. The one saying that phrasal verbs are “words used together that do not have a logical explanation” may be recognized as lacking in precision. The last one which states that they are “expressions that are drudgery to learn” may be treated as a playful description which may indicate the student’s intention of avoiding a serious definition of phrasal verbs.

4.2. Question 2

The second question concerned the significance of phrasal verbs. The students were asked to decide how important the knowledge of phrasal verbs was. They could choose on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that phrasal verbs are unimportant and 5 meaning that they are of great importance. The results are presented in Table 6 and Figure 1.

Table 6

The importance of phrasal verbs according to the students

Knowing phrasal verbs is...	Number of students	Percentage
unimportant	3	0.5
of little importance	12	2
of average importance	91	16.5
quite important	307	56
very important	137	25
Total	550	100

The survey reveals that the majority of the students (97 %) claim that knowing phrasal verbs is of at least average importance. The students are aware of the fact that phrasal verbs are significant in English. The biggest group are those students who think that knowing phrasal verbs is quite important (56 %). Only 15 students out of 550 (nearly 3 %) state that phrasal verbs are of little or no importance. The reasons for such choices appear in the answers to the next questions of the survey which are analysed below.

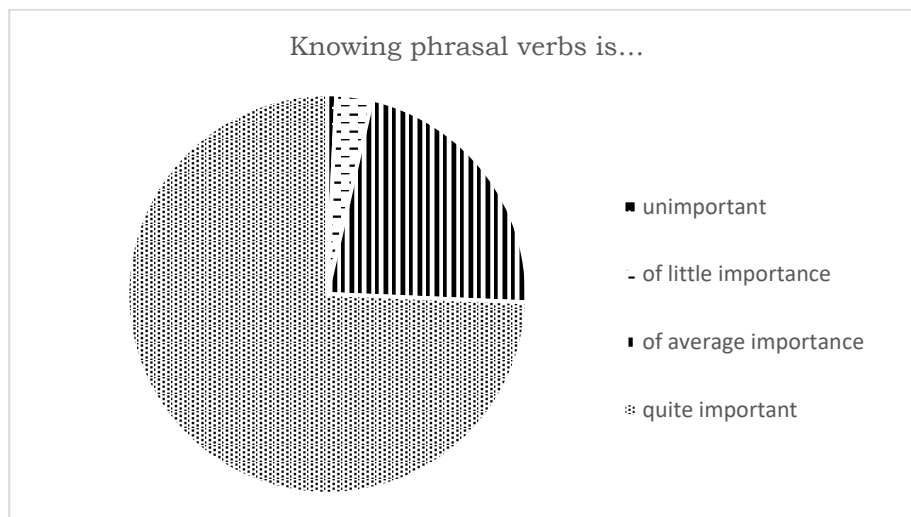


Figure 1

The importance of phrasal verbs according to the students

4.3. Question 3

Question 3 was addressed to those students who, in the previous question (number 2), stated that phrasal verbs are important. The respondents were requested to explain why they perceived phrasal verbs to be a vital part of English by choosing one or more provided answers. Table 7 and Figure 2 show the students' answers to this question.

Analysing the data, it can be seen that 26 % of the students' answers refer to improving general language skills. The students selected the facilitation of natural communication with foreigners almost as frequently as the previous answer (24 %). It emphasized that the students were aware of the significance of phrasal verbs in communication, especially with native speakers, since they used phrasal verbs on a daily basis. Facilitating listening and reading comprehension was virtually equally important (respectively 18 % and 17 % of all the provided answers). The least significant reason chosen by the students was the facilitation of informal electronic communication with foreigners. Taking into account the figures above, it seems that phrasal

verbs are needed when oral communication with foreigners arises, since it requires instant understanding of the interlocutor. In reading and writing, the instant skill of understanding phrasal verbs seems to be less important, which may stem from the fact that students have time to check the meanings of unknown phrasal verbs and no immediate reply is needed.

There were 163 students (30 %) who marked all the answers showing that phrasal verbs are needed in every aspect of language use mentioned.

Table 7

Reasons for the importance of phrasal verbs according to the students

The knowledge of phrasal verbs...	Number of answers	Percentage of answers	Percentage of students
improves language skills	446	26	81
facilitates natural communication with foreigners	420	24	76
facilitates understanding of listening	315	18	57
facilitates understanding of texts (books, articles)	285	17	52
facilitates informal electronic communication with foreigners	260	15	47
Total	1726	100	

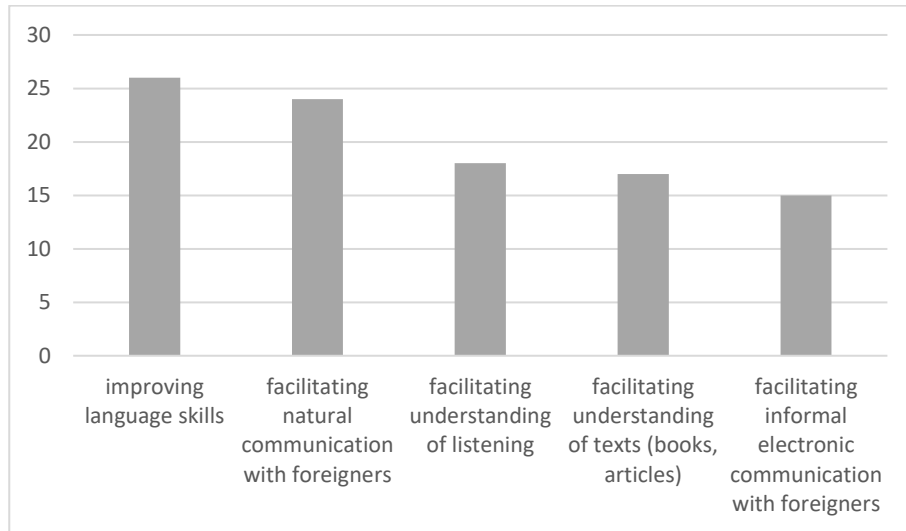


Figure 2
Reasons for the importance of phrasal verbs according to the students

4.4. Question 4

Question 4 was for those students who indicated in question 2 that phrasal verbs are of little or no importance. The students were asked to choose the statements they agreed with and, if possible, present their own reasons for the unimportance of phrasal verbs. However, in the analysis of the data, it was apparent that the question was also answered by the students who claimed that phrasal verbs are significant. Although only 15 students out of 550 stated that phrasal verbs are of little or no importance (see 4.2), the inquiry about the reasons for the unimportance of phrasal verbs was answered by 62 students (see Table 8). This may stem from two factors. Firstly, it might be the result of the students' inattention while filling in the questionnaire as they might not have noticed that the question should have been answered only by those who had marked that phrasal verbs were not vital to them. Secondly, it might be the result of the ambiguous attitude of the students towards this linguistic unit. Although they understood that phrasal verbs are import-

ant since they are widely used, they also noticed that the multi-word verbs are not indispensably necessary for them to use English freely.

Table 8

The number of students explaining why knowing phrasal verbs is unimportant

Knowing phrasal verbs is...	Number of students	Number of students explaining the unimportance of phrasal verbs
unimportant	3	3
of little importance	12	12
of average importance	91	35
quite important	307	10
very important	137	2
Total	550	62

All of the students who marked phrasal verbs as unimportant provided explanations for their choice. However, as previously mentioned, those who perceived phrasal verbs as quite important also indicated their explanations for their unimportance. It may be surprising that almost 40 % (35 out of 91) of the students who claimed that phrasal verbs are of average importance also indicated statements showing why these multi-word verbs are not that crucial. Additionally, there are two students out of the 137 who marked phrasal verbs as very important and then answered the question concerning the unimportance of phrasal verbs.

Table 9 and Figure 3 show the students' reasons for the unimportance of learning phrasal verbs.

Table 9
Reasons indicating unimportance of learning
phrasal verbs according to the students

The knowledge of phrasal verbs is unimportant because phrasal verbs...	Number of answers	Percentage of answers	Percentage of students
are useless since it is possible to communicate freely without knowing them	36	37	6.5
have their English equivalents which are not phrasal verbs so learning these difficult to remember expressions is not very useful	34	35	6.2
are not commonly used by native speakers so knowing them does not influence the level of general knowledge of the English language	13	14	2.4
are limited in their use as they are mainly employed in speaking and by native speakers so learning them is of little use	7	7	1.3
other reasons	7	7	1.3
Total	97	100	100

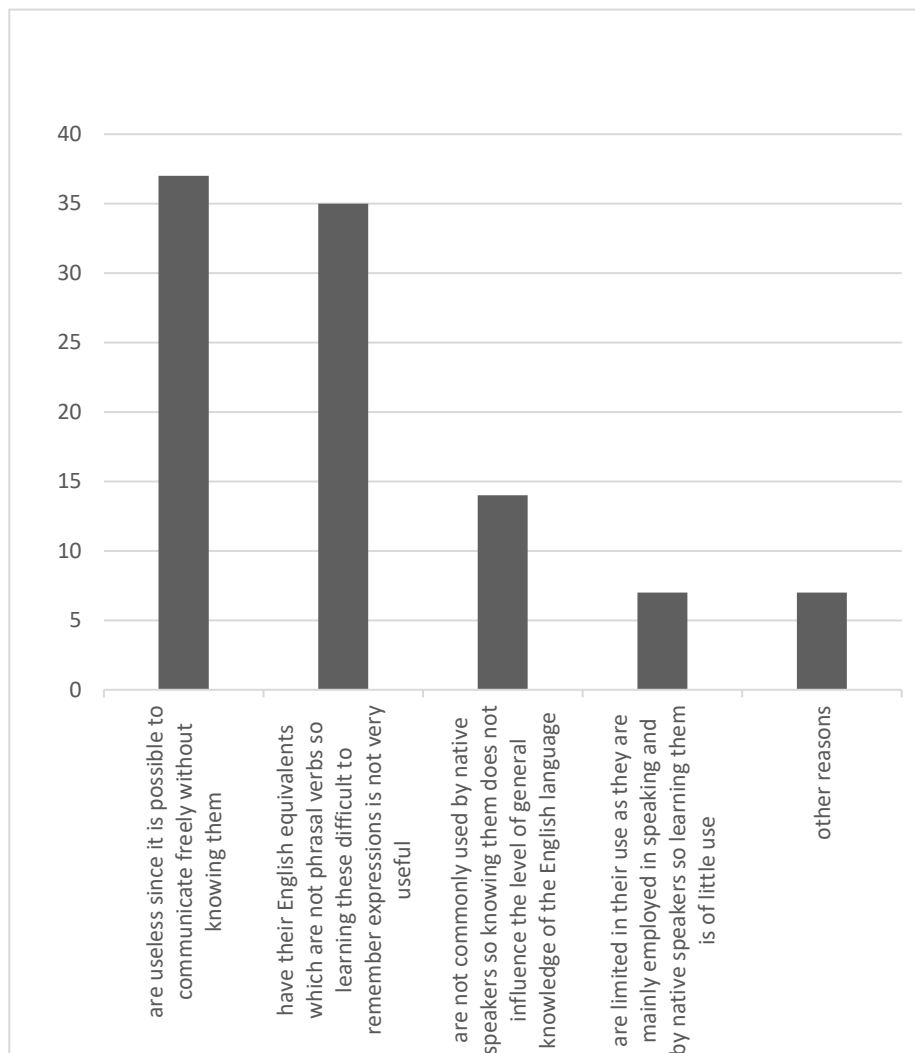


Figure 3
Reasons for the unimportance of learning phrasal verbs according to the students

The 62 surveyed students who answered question 4 (“If you think that the knowledge of phrasal verbs is unimportant, choose one of the statements below or give your own explanation”) provided 97 answers. The survey shows that among all

the answers provided by the students who indicated learning phrasal verbs as negligible or of average importance, 72 % of the students' answers referred to the possibility of communicating in English without any restrictions when phrasal verbs are unknown and to the existence of many equivalents in English so that phrasal verbs are not necessary. 14 % of the students' replies concerned phrasal verbs not being widely used by native speakers so knowledge of them is futile, and 7 % of the responses were connected with the limited use of phrasal verbs, which made learning them useless. There were also students who provided their own reasons for not needing to learn phrasal verbs. Their answers are presented in Table 10.

Table 10

Reasons indicating unimportance of learning phrasal verbs according to the students

Students' own explanations of little importance of learning phrasal verbs	Number of students
<i>There are too many phrasal verbs and it is difficult to remember them.</i>	3
<i>Phrasal verbs are extremely hard to learn, remember and use.</i>	2
<i>People will finally discover their meanings on their own and will start using them.</i>	1
<i>There is too much learning for the final result.</i>	1
<i>They are mainly used by native speakers, they help in communication but they are not indispensable.</i>	1
<i>I do not focus on what kind of verb it is, I just use it.</i>	1
Total	9

The given responses show that the students found numerous phrasal verbs difficult to learn and remember. They seemed to feel discouraged from making an effort to memorise phrasal verbs since they have other English equivalents which can be used instead.

Although the students understood that phrasal verbs are important since they are widely used, the students also noticed that the multi-word verbs are not indispensable in order to use English freely.

5. Conclusions

The students of upper secondary schools in Gdańsk provided sufficient material to analyse the approach to these difficult multi-word verbs.

It can be observed that out of all the surveyed students, the majority were able to provide a correct and generally coherent definition of phrasal verbs focused on their main characteristic features. This shows that the students know what this language unit looks like and would be able to distinguish it from other types of English expressions. As far as analysing the significance of phrasal verbs, 97 % of the students responded that phrasal verbs are an important part of their command of English for a variety of reasons, which included improving their personal language skills and facilitating communication with foreigners. Although the students were aware that phrasal verbs usually have one-word English equivalents and that they could communicate with other people without knowing phrasal verbs, the English learners saw that mastering phrasal verbs is essential in order to reach a higher level of language competence. Being aware that phrasal verbs “are notoriously difficult for non-native learners to acquire” (Gardner and Davis 2007: 340) it is of crucial importance for teachers and ELT specialists to facilitate the students’ process of acquiring them. Multi-word verbs should be presented in a clear, well-organized and memorable way with the help of meaningful tasks so that students will become regular users of these demanding lexical units.

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Appendix 1

Phrasal verb survey in Polish for
students learning English at level B2

Ankieta dla uczniów uczących się języka angielskiego
na poziomie B2 (upper-intermediate) dotycząca
czasowników frazowych (phrasal verbs)

Płeć: K/M

W której klasie jesteś?

Z jakiego podręcznika się uczysz? (podaj tytuł).....

.....

Ile lat uczysz się języka angielskiego?

1. Co to są czasowniki frazowe (phrasal verbs)?

.....

.....

.....

2. W jakim stopniu, w skali od 1 do 5, uznałbyś/uznałabyś znajomość
czasowników frazowych za ważną dla znajomości języka angielskiego:

1 – nieważna,

2 – mało ważna,

3 – średnio ważna,

4 – dość ważna,

5 – bardzo ważna.

3. Jeżeli uważasz, że znajomość czasowników frazowych jest ważna,
wybierz stwierdzenia, z którym się zgadzasz. Znajomość czasowni-
ków frazowych:

a) ułatwia naturalną komunikację z obcokrajowcem,

b) ułatwia rozumienie tekstu czytanego (czytanie książek, artyku-
łów z gazet),

c) ułatwia rozumienie tekstu słuchanego (multimedia, słuchanie
muzyki, wiadomości),

d) ułatwia nieformalną komunikację elektroniczną,

e) zwiększa sprawność językową.

4. Jeżeli uważasz, że znajomość czasowników frazowych jest nie-
ważna, wybierz stwierdzenia, z którymi się zgadzasz. Czasowniki

frazowe:

- a) mają w języku angielskim swoje odpowiedniki niebędące czasownikami frazowymi, więc uczenie się ich jest mało przydatne,
- b) są niepotrzebne, gdyż również bez ich znajomości można swobodnie posługiwać się językiem angielskim,
- c) to czasowniki rzadko stosowane przez rodzimych użytkowników języka angielskiego (np. Brytyjczyków, Amerykanów), więc ich znajomość nie wpływa na poziom ogólnej wiedzy języka angielskiego,
- d) czasowniki frazowe mają ograniczone zastosowanie (są używane głównie w mowie), więc uczenie się ich jest mało przydatne,
- e) inne (proszę podać swoją propozycję)

.....

Appendix 2

Phrasal verb survey in English for students learning English at level B2

Gender: F/M

What grade are you ?

What coursebook do you use? (give the title, please)

How long have you been learning English?

1. What are phrasal verbs?

.....

2. To what extent, in range from 1 to 5, do you consider knowing phrasal verbs as important?

- 1 – unimportant,
- 2 – of little importance,
- 3 – of average importance,
- 4 – quite important,
- 5 – very important.

3. If you think that knowledge of phrasal verbs is important, choose a statement or statements which you agree with. The knowledge of phrasal verbs:

- (a) facilitates natural communication with foreigners,
 - (b) facilitates understanding of texts (reading books, newspapers),
 - (c) facilitates understanding listening (multimedia, listening to music or news),
 - (d) facilitates informal electronic communication,
 - (e) improves language skills.
4. If you think that the knowledge of phrasal verbs is unimportant, choose a statement or statements which you agree with. Phrasal verbs:
- (a) have their English equivalents which are not phrasal verbs so learning this difficult to remember expressions is not very useful,
 - (b) are useless since it is possible to communicate freely in English without knowing them,
 - (c) are not commonly used by native speakers so knowing them does not influence the level of general knowledge of the English language,
 - (d) are limited in their use as they are mainly employed in speaking and by native speakers so learning them is of little use,
 - (e) other reasons (give your own suggestions)
-
-

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