CLASSROOM RESEARCH ON THE TEACHING OF PHRASAL VERB COMBINATIONS

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Abstract
Teaching phrasal verbs to Spanish students is a difficult area for Secondary Education and Post Compulsory Education Students. For that reason, and considering the lack of available materials, a research was carried out on the explicit teaching of the causative and metaphorical meanings of prepositions in order to check if their understanding improved. The process and results are described in the following pages.

Key words: Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Post Compulsory Education, phrasal verbs, prepositions, causativity, metaphorical meanings of prepositions, explicit teaching.

Resumen
La enseñanza-aprendizaje de los verbos frasales es un área difícil para los alumnos españoles. Esto, junto con la falta de recursos y literatura motivaron un proceso de investigación en el que se enseñó de forma explícita tanto el concepto de causatividad como los significados reales y metafóricos de las preposiciones inglesas. Los resultados del mismo, que fueron positivos, así como el proceso, se describen en las páginas siguientes.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera, verbos frasales, Bachillerato y Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, causatividad, enseñanza explícita, preposiciones.
1. INTRODUCTION

This article describes a research process carried out in 2006/2007 with Post Compulsory Education Students in a High School of Andalucía (more specifically, IES Pablo de Olavide, in La Carolina). In this classroom research, students had to learn some prepositions in an explicit way to check if this might improve their studying and understanding of phrasal verb combinations in English.

The reasons for carrying out this research were the following: the first one is the problems that phrasal verb combinations posit to the students. Bachillerato students tend to memorise phrasal verbs rather than understanding them, and therefore, this area is difficult. In that respect, the materials available only present phrasal verbs in two ways: students have to learn them and produce the latinade words related to them or students learn verbs by heart related to a specific lexical field.

The second reason is that the techniques usually employed do not really serve to solve the communicative needs of students as far as they forget about the meaning of these combinations as soon as the exam finishes. In fact, the lack of appropriate materials or further methodological clues is also a motivation for the present research.

The third and final hypothesis to be tested was the usefulness of an explicit approach to the presentation of phrasal and prepositional verbs as a way of improving the students’ level of understanding.

Hence, the present investigation process aims at finding out different approaches to teach phrasal verbs to SLA students so as to improve their understanding and learning. The remainder of this article provides a brief literature review that constitutes the basis of the research, the research process itself and finally some conclusions.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of varied sources aimed at teaching phrasal verbs is one of the most problematic areas of this research, since mostly, there are merely grammatical approaches or some dictionaries in which their meaning is explained or translated.

Therefore, as a start, it is necessary to take the grammar references to explain what phrasal verbs are. According to Trask (1993: 208), a phrasal verb is a lexical verb “which consists of a simple verb combined with one or more particles” and whose meaning is typically unpredictable.

In addition to this, it is necessary to distinguish between phrasal and prepositional verbs. According to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 148) there are four different types of verb-particle combinations:

a. If the verb is intransitive, the particle is a prepositional-adverb, functioning as adjunct. Thus, it is a phrasal verb.

b. If the verb is transitive, and the particle is not mobile it is a prepositional verb.

c. If the verb is transitive, but the particle is mobile, it is also a phrasal verb.

d. If two particles follow, then, it is a phrasal-prepositional verb.

Notwithstanding, though necessary, this distinction was not be presented to Post Compulsory Education students not to confuse them, since in fact, this was their first explicit approach to phrasal verbs.

On some occasions, the use of dictionaries, especially those aimed at Spanish speakers may be of help for Spanish students. In fact, a review of some of them may be interesting, and could also be useful in a further research project. For instance, and taking the COLLINS COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs (1989:140), there is also a relevant piece of information of some of the phrasal verbs that was also presented to the students. Actually, if looking at the entry of the verb: “go through”, there is also an explanation of the meaning, the latinade form of it, and many examples. Another important element to be regarded is the inclusion of some syntactic information
mentioning the word class of the particle and if it is transitive or intransitive, which helps us to know the actual usage of the phrasal verb.

Similarly, in Khalaili & Marina (1983) the same type of information is found as well as a translation into Spanish and some exercises which may prove useful to the students. This reading may be suggested to fast finishers or to students more interested in the subject.

Another important element to be regarded in this research was the age factor, since the students involved were 17-18 year old, nearer the adult age. To that respect, Ellis (1994: 97) explains the need for explicit learning and the great improvements it brings. All in all, explicit teaching practice was used in this research process in order to make the explicit knowledge become automatized in the learner’s mind.

3. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Due to the level of the experiment, students required for it had to be already familiar with the notion of phrasal verbs and their average level was intermediate. Together with this, the character of the groups involved was rather homogeneous in order to improve the reliability of the process. Taking all these ideas into consideration the groups involved were in the First Year of Bachillerato.

For that purpose, there were 2 groups of Bachillerato with 15 subjects of about 17 years old and a homogeneous level and with a relative interest in the English Language. Thus, one group was the experimental and the other was the control group, used to check if the hypotheses of the project are fulfilled.

Therefore, the process of research had the following structure:

1. Initial test to check the knowledge of phrasal verbs

This initial test was similar to the one done afterwards, in such a way that the progress of the subjects of the study was tested. Thus, it presented twenty phrasal verbs in
context to be translated into Spanish and 10 to be translated into English. One session of 55 minutes was devoted to that with both groups.

2. Initial approach to the general knowledge of the use of prepositions

The experimental group was presented with some activities to be corrected in the classroom in order obtain some kind of feedback on their background knowledge.

As a start, some reference material in which the actual and metaphorical meanings and uses of prepositions are explained was used. A good example of this, once again is found in Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 191-201). To that respect, students were presented with well known prepositions referring to destination and position (to, at, away, on, off, in, out).

Finally, students were presented with the metaphorical implication of prepositions, which, according to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 196) refers to the application of spatial prepositions to some abstract notions:

- e.g. “out of the bottle” vs. “out of danger”

3. Phrasal verbs, an initial approach

This third stage was covered by the presentation of the general concept of phrasal verb, recovering as well the ideas of the previous day related to prepositions.

The presentation and translation of some phrasal verbs in context was easy with the participation of students. Together with this, students were asked to remember some examples well known to them ("jump on", "jump into"...).

Finally, and as homework, students were asked to search for examples they in some reading materials from their own textbook (New Impact I).

4. Second approach to phrasal verbs and reverse translation


In the following session, some minutes were devoted to the homework and translation of the examples found in the materials given. Taking into consideration the book, some examples were: “swim across”, “get away with”, “go through” or “put away”.

Together with them, there was also an reverse translation task by means of which students were presented with Spanish examples to be translated into English so that students could think in English.

Examples given were: “cruzar nadando” “huir corriendo” “salir andando”… These examples helped students to think over the different examples and recycle their previous knowledge on phrasal verbs and prepositions.

5. Final test

The final test was done to both groups in order to assess the process of learning. The test very short, including 20 phrasal verbs in context to be translated into Spanish. Students also had to explain the reason why a preposition was chosen instead of another. All in all, pupils needed about 30 minutes to complete the exam.

6. Exam correction, formative evaluation and second test

This session was devoted to correct the exam in class after telling them the marks obtained. Thus, this kind of evaluation was wholly formative (Lara Ros, 2001) since students would revise again and go through their mistakes.

A final part of the session, 30 minutes, was be devoted to a second test in which students had to translate ten phrasal verbs in context into English. The examples were be easy to translate to the average of students.
4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final section describes the results of the tests and the assessment of this research process also on the part of the students. This is essential in order to check the usefulness of the teaching itself as well as the possible options for future research.

Statistically speaking, the first piece of information to consider is that the experimental group consisted of 15 students. Considering the first test as carried out in the experimental group, the average obtained by students was 6.43. Hence, analysing these statistics, we have to assert that most students were able to understand the main points of causativity and the implications of the different phrasal verbs presented. Only a few students were above the average (only seven in fact).

As the previous data show, students were able to explain the combination of most verb-prepositions such as “up” “down” “into” or “through” explaining their factual and metaphorical meanings. The bad results obtained by some other pupils was due to their lack of level and in this particular case, to the fact that they did not attend to class in the days of the “lectures” and activities.

As far as the second exam is concerned, and statistically speaking, it is necessary to say that the average mark of students was 6 and the mode (i.e. the most repeated mark) was a surprisingly high one: 9. Therefore, we can assert that only five students out of fifteen could not pass the exam whereas five students obtained a score higher than the average.

Going back to the previous idea, the number of pupils who succeeded in the exam with an A mark is also remarkable. Notwithstanding, this was the first time that students came across an inverse translation of phrasal verbs (except for the previous lesson) and it really showed that most of them could not only understand, but also apply the main implications of causativity.

Comparing these results with the control group also shed some light to the investigation. There, out of 16 students, the average in the first test was 5.4, slightly lower than in the experimental group. Students found some problems when explaining examples into Spanish, although some phrasal verbs were already familiar to them.
In the final test, the results were even worse, and the average mark was 4.8, due to the higher complexity of the test. Here, most students found it impossible to give a reverse translation of phrasal verbs. The marks obtained were also rather low.

Taking into consideration the small amount of time devoted to the concepts presented and the minimum amount of procedures, the assessment of this project was highly profitable, much more than simple memorisation. Most students were able to grasp what was presented; they could make use of previous examples and were highly involved and motivated in the tasks. Together with this, the results of the exams clearly epitomized such involvement and motivation, except for a few cases.

Another methodological implication that should be noticed is the use of translation as a teaching tool. Even though it is commonly neglected, the use of direct and inverse translation made the students think carefully both in English and Spanish.

Finally, and just to conclude with this part of the analysis, it is necessary to present the students’ evaluation of this research process. To that respect, except for one case, all of them found the presentation highly useful and interesting. Generally speaking, most of them wondered why they had never been presented with these techniques before and had had to learn phrasal verbs by heart. All in all, most of them were satisfied with the results and openly stated that they would use the ideas presented in the future whenever they found a phrasal verb.

Therefore, the hypothesis presented in the introduction of this article was confirmed and the explicit teaching of phrasal verbs proved to be beneficial for students to learn them.

Together with this, I would also recommend other teachers to introduce this kind of presentation to see if students enjoy it. In addition to this, the design of new materials aimed at developing logic and analysis rather than memorisation would be highly recommendable both for students and teachers.
5. BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX I

INITIAL TEST

-ANALYSE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES WITH VERB- PREPOSITION COMBINATIONS. EXPLAIN THEIR ACTUAL MEANING IN SPANISH:

1. Run through. He ran through the forest
2. Jump off: He jumps off a window
3. Jump on. He jumps on a block
4. Take off: The plane takes off
5. Push off: He pushed off the place
6. Turn into. The water turned into ice
7. Make into. The water was made into ice
8. Marry into. She married into nobility
9. Boil into. The discussion boiled into a fight
10. Wash away. He washed away his tears
11. Put away. To put away a meeting
12. Run away. He ran away from the city
13. Climb up. He climbed up the stairs
14. Climb down. He climbed down a mountain
15. Drive in. He drove in home
16. Drive out. He drove out home
17. Burst into: She bust into tears
18. Break down. She broke down when her husband died
19. Sail down. He sailed down the river
20. Go through. He went through the problems with no help
APPENDIX II
EXPRESS THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES IN ENGLISH BY MEANS OF A VERB-PREPOSITION COMBINATION:

1. Él ascendió montaña arriba
2. Cruzó el lago a nado
3. Cruzó el bosque corriendo
4. Su canción murió en un sollozo
5. Ella saltó al río
6. Ella escapó de prisión corriendo
7. El hombre se transformó en Spiderman
8. Salió de casa conduciendo su coche
9. El salió de casa andando
10. Ella atravesó una situación difícil en casa.