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Multi-word items

PART A What do we know about this?

As we have already seen in Chapters 1 and 2, when we start to describe words, we see that a ‘word’ can be represented in any number of ways:

- single items or basic roots: *table, door, lamp*
- compounds where two or more words are combined: *tabletop, door-handle, lampshade*
- lexical chunks with relatively fixed meanings: *at the end of the day, so on and so forth, to and fro*
- prepositional phrases: *at the moment, on the left, over and over*

It is clear, then, that we cannot always talk about words as single items. Instead, we must understand how combinations of words function to produce specific meanings. One such category of fixed forms is idioms which we will cover in Chapter 6.

Here, we will focus on compounds, prepositional phrases and lexical chunks. What characteristics do these vocabulary items have, what problems do they pose for learners and how might we go about teaching them?

Compounds

As you may remember from Chapter 1, a compound is simply a word that is made up of a root form and other ‘add-ons’, which may be other words or **affixes**. An affix simply refers to the additional ‘bits’ which we add at to the beginning or end of a word. For example, the word *unproblematic* is made up of the root *problem*, the prefix *un-*, and the suffix *-atic*. By combining these various elements, we can change both the form and meaning of a word; in this case, from the noun *problem* to the adjective *unproblematic*. Alternatively, we can combine a single root word with others to give different meanings: *word+list = wordlist, check+out = checkout*, and so on.

Affixation

English has a fairly limited number of affixes which can be used to make compounds and change a word's form or basic meaning. Some are relatively productive and allow many compounds to be generated.

Most native speakers are able to work out the meanings of words from their knowledge of affixes and it is clearly worth teaching learners how affixes function so they can work out the meanings of new words.

TASK 1

Complete the table below. Say what the function of each affix is and add one more example for each.

Affix and function	Examples
-ly (makes an adjective)	<i>Quickly</i>
non-	<i>non-starter</i>
in-	<i>inconvenient</i>
re-	<i>recast</i>
-ing	<i>reading</i>
de-	<i>devalue</i>
-s	<i>boys</i>

Compounding

In addition to using affixes to change the form or meaning of a word, we can also simply combine words:

noun + noun	<i>handlebar, window-cleaner, keypad</i>
adjective + noun	<i>soft-spot, hardhat</i>
verb + noun	<i>grindstone, pushchair</i>
verb + verb	<i>make-do</i>
verb + particle	<i>get by, lean over</i>
particle + noun	<i>off-day, on-task, overdraw</i>

Note that, from a learning and teaching point of view, most materials present compounds as single word items and do not 'break them down' into their constituent parts. There is strong evidence to suggest that we store and retrieve words as 'whole units' (See, for example, Lewis, 2002). The implication, then, is that this how they should be taught.

TASK 2

Give three examples of compounds for each combination below (15 words in total):

- noun + noun
- adjective + noun
- verb + noun
- verb + verb
- verb + particle

TASK 3

To what extent do you feel a need to **deconstruct** words like the following in order to ascertain their meaning? What about learners? What strategies might be useful for teaching learners how to deal with such words?

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Reproduce</i> | <i>Irrefutable</i> |
| <i>Unforgettable</i> | <i>Photogenic</i> |
| <i>Unimaginable</i> | <i>Irresponsibility</i> |

Prepositional phrases

There are many **prepositional phrases** in English which function as single word items. They usually comprise a preposition plus a noun phrase and often refer to place or time: *at the end of the day*; *from time to time*; *from here to eternity*; *for ever and ever*. Again, these are normally learnt as single items and are not usually broken down into their constituent parts. It is interesting to note that some of these phrases have both literal and idiomatic meanings, for example, *at the end of the day*, which can mean both ‘as the day comes to an end’ and ‘in conclusion’.

Phrasal verbs

When we combine verbs with other grammatical words, such as adverbs, we create **phrasal verbs** such as *take off*, *put on*, *get out*, etc. Each phrasal verb consists of a verb (take), and a particle, normally a preposition or adverb (off). Phrasal verbs pose problems for learners for a number of reasons:

- there are so many of them and they have similar forms
- their meanings are often similar
- their meanings are often difficult to work out
- they occur in informal English, making them difficult to identify and understand.

A major difficulty is deciding which of the many phrasal verbs are the most useful to teach. Using corpora, we can find out which verbs occur most frequently. For example, the most frequent particles in phrasal verbs are *in*, *on*, *up*, *out*, *off*, *down*, *around*, *for*, *with*, and so on. These combine with the most frequent verbs such as *go*, *come*, *get*, *make*, *look*, *put*, etc. From this we can make a list of core, useful phrasal verbs for teaching which will include items such as *get on*, *get by*, *go on*, *look up*, *look around*, *make up*, *put in*, *put off*, and so forth (McCarthy et al., 2007).

Another difficulty is that meanings may be highly transparent or more context-specific. Consider *get on*, for example. Depending on the context, it can mean 'board' (*Mike got on the number 42 bus*), 'continue' (*get on with your work*), 'understand' (*you all need to get on together*), or 'leave' (*I'd better be getting on*). We can say, then, that some words are more opaque or transparent than others; their meanings are more obvious whether they appear in or out of context.

Some verbs can be separated from their particle, others cannot. Compare, for example:

work out: 'I worked out the answer myself' OR 'I worked the answer out myself'
get on: 'We're getting on fine now' BUT NOT 'We're getting fine on now'

TASK 4

Which of the following phrasal verbs are separable and which are not?

look around	get up to	put on	make do
look up	get on	put off	make off with
look at	get around to	put up to	make sure
look over	get off	put through	make over

Lexical chunks

In addition to compounds and prepositional phrases, there are many other multi-word units, or '**lexical chunks**' which are fixed or semi-fixed, and which we can treat as single words. There are different ways of classifying these, including:

- Discourse markers: *by the way, what's more, even so.*
- Social formulae (used to establish and maintain relations): *how's it going, see you soon, I was wondering if.*
- Sentence builders (used as 'a way into' a particular topic or subject): *the thing is, what I mean is, if you ask me.*

One advantage of lexical chunks for learners is that they can be learnt as single items, saving time and making recall faster. Some claim that learning and using chunks is an aid to fluency, allowing speakers and writers more time to clarify intended meaning or to seek clarification.

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Another advantage of lexical chunks is that they can be used to generate other phrases which have similar meanings: *see you later* → *see you soon* → *see you in a bit* → *see you next week*, and so on.



Some of the most frequently found chunks are used almost exclusively in spoken English, more specifically in conversations. Take *I think* and *you know*, for example.

When we look at spoken corpora, these chunks have a very high frequency because they perform specific functions. *I think* acts as a kind of hedge to soften what speakers are saying and to help them be less assertive, while *you know* creates 'shared space' between speakers, allowing greater informality and more equal roles.

Consider these examples:

(1)

[Discussing a successful football team]

- A: *Is it the degree of talent that they have? Maybe the system that they've put in? Is it the coaching?*
B: *Well, I, I think it's a combination. There's no doubt that they have outstanding talent, you know.*

(2)

- A: *So if you just go down to the fish market or the butcher or, you know, just your local supermarket and see what's on offer that day. And cook it – grill it up, and that's your dinner.*

In (1), Speaker B uses a combination of *I think* and *you know* to express an opinion, but also to soften that stance and present a more sympathetic point of view. Remove these chunks and the interaction immediately becomes less friendly, even hostile.

There are many other two-word chunks which are used in spoken language to help create successful interactions. These include *I mean*, *you see*, *I see*, and *I know* and are normally referred to as **discourse markers**. Clearly, learners must master these key chunks and understand how they function to help maintain the flow of a conversation.

Some of the more common words frequently occur in longer chunks. Take *know* for example. *Know* is used in four and five word chunks which have high frequencies and which are essential in spoken discourse. Consider the following examples taken from the COBUILD American spoken corpus:

- *Know what I mean?*
- *Do you know what I mean?*
- *Do you know what I'm saying?*
- *You know what I'm saying?*
- *I know what you mean.*

In each case, the function of the chunk is to maintain the flow of the interaction, keep the channels open and ensure that speaker and listener understand each other.

TASK 5

There are many examples of lexical chunks which are used to create and maintain relationships. These 'social formulae' can be quite confusing for learners and may even be misused. Which of the following would you teach to a group of adult, intermediate learners? Which would you omit and why?

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| How's tricks? | See you. |
| Have a good one. | Long time no see. |
| Nice to see you. | Better be going now. |
| What about you? | Catch you later. |

Other high-frequency chunks include the following, again, all taken from the American spoken corpus:

WORD	FREQUENT CHUNKS
Time	for a time, at the time, a short time, a long time, most of the time
Way	the way things are going, the way home, change in the way, in the same way
End	at the end of, in the end, come to an end, by the end of, towards the end of
Thing	one thing that, this /that kind of thing, the same thing, the important thing is
Things	a lot of things, kinds of things, things like that, one of the things

Why chunks are important

Including common chunks in the notion of ‘vocabulary’ has some important consequences for learning English:

- We begin to look at vocabulary as consisting of more than just single words and collocating pairs of words.
- In spoken language especially, some of the most common chunks have important interactive functions (hedging or calling on shared knowledge, for example).
- The most common chunks help to create successful communication.
- Ready-made chunks enable us to be fluent. We do not have to create them anew every time we need them (see Wray, 2000, 2002).
- If learners can learn and retrieve the most useful chunks, they will sound more fluent.

(McCarthy et al., 2007)

Binomials and trinomials

English also has a number of pairs (**binomials**) and trios (**trinomials**) of words which are fixed both syntactically and semantically; that is, both the word order and meaning are invariable. Examples include:

Binomials

to and fro
black and white
salt and pepper
fish and chips
sick and tired

Trinomials

cool, calm and collected
hook, line and sinker
left, right and centre
ready, willing and able
(McCarthy, 1990)

Clearly, the implication for learners is that these have to be learnt and used as single items. Breaking such fixed phrases down into their constituent parts is only

going to cause confusion and slow down the learning process. As Palmer said many years ago (1925) when giving advice about oral fluency, ‘memorise perfectly the largest number of common and useful word groups’. (See also Chapter 1).

PART B What are the problems for learners?

There are several difficulties for learners associated with multi-word items:

- 1 Transparency of meaning. We’ve already seen that the meanings of some multi-word items are straightforward and literal, while others are more difficult to predict, even from context. For example, many phrasal and prepositional verbs have to be learnt as their meaning cannot be worked out, even from context. Examples include *to be out on a limb*, *to be on the ball*.
- 2 Fixedness. Some items are totally fixed and cannot be changed at all, while others can generate similar expressions (as in greetings, for example, *see you*, *see you later*, *see you next week* and so on). For learners, it is difficult to learn the extent to which an item is fixed or variable.
- 3 Frequency and usefulness. Depending on the context where learning is taking place, some items will have more relevance than others. For example, the greeting *What about you?* is very common in Northern Ireland and learners there would find it useful. However, it is not widely used in other contexts and could therefore be ignored.
- 4 Pronunciation. Sentence stress and rhythm are key to correct pronunciation of multi-word units. For example, the binomial *black and white* has to stress ‘black’ and ‘white’, while ‘and’ is practically ‘thrown away’. Learners need to understand this principle at an early stage if they are to master correct pronunciation. Similarly, the word stress in compounds may cause some difficulty for learners when they encounter a word for the first time. How can learners know where to place the stress on a word they come across for the first time?
- 5 Syntax. The word order of multi-word units is normally fixed and cannot be varied. We normally say *boys and girls*, not *girls and boys*, or *fish and chips*, not *chips and fish*, and so on. A learner’s ability to master the exact word order is key to their ability to sound more like a native speaker.
- 6 Guessing meaning from context. As we’ve seen in the earlier part of this chapter, some fixed expressions are difficult to predict even when they are used in context. For example, what clues can learners use to guess the meanings of the following phrases?

Long time no see

She always has to make a scene

I just don’t know which way to turn

TASK 6

Why might the following items present difficulties for learners? Translate them into another language that you are familiar with. What differences do you see between the two languages in terms of words used, word order and literal meanings?

Forever and a day
Get on with
Make it up
Kinds of things
By the end of
At the time

PART C How do we teach it?

Context and level

Teaching multi-word items will obviously depend on both context and level. With advanced learners, a more inductive approach can be adopted, whereby learners are left to work things out on their own. With lower levels, teachers will need to offer more support and guidance and check form, function and pronunciation.

Form	What grammatical features need to be observed (for example, the use of prepositions, verb form, and so on)?
Function	What does the item mean and how can meaning be checked?
Pronunciation	What is the most natural pronunciation, which key words need to be stressed, which can be 'thrown away', unstressed?

Take the very common phrase *at the end of the day*, for example. Learners will have encountered all of these words individually before, but what special features do they need to notice in this phrase? First of all, the use of prepositions *at* and *of* (we don't say *in the end of the day*, for example) and the definite article *the*. Secondly, they should notice the specific meaning, 'in conclusion' or 'when all's said and done'. Finally, the pronunciation: put stress on *end* and *day*; 'throw away' *at* and *the*; and note the linking between *end* and *of*.

TASK 7

Look at the extract below from a pre-intermediate, adult ESL class. How well does this teacher teach *in a penalty shoot-out*? Consider the points made above and suggest ways in which this might have been done better.

- 81 T now ... see if you can find the words that are suitable in these phrases (reading) in the world cup final of 1994 Brazil Italy 2 3 2 and in a shoot-out ... what words would you put in there? ((1))
- 82 L7 [beat]
- 83 T [what] beat Italy 3 2 yeah in?
- 84 L7: in a penalty shoot-out
- 85 T a what?
- 86 L7: in a penalty shoot-out
- 87 T in a penalty shoot-out very good in a penalty shoot-out

(Walsh, 2001)

TASK 8

In the extract below, the teacher is working with a group of upper-intermediate, adult, ESL learners. Notice how she guides them to the meaning and use of *roller skating*.

- (a) How does she 'scaffold' (feed in linguistic support) the word that L5 is looking for?
- (b) How does she model the correct use of the word?
- (c) How does she repair learners' contributions (correct errors)?
- 218 L5: the good news is he went to the went to
- 219 T: he went to what do we call these things the shoes with wheels
- 220 L2: ah skates
- 221 L6: roller skates
- 222 T: ROLler skates roller skates so [he went]
- 223 L5: [he went] to
- 224 L: roller SKATing
- 225 T: SKATing
- 226 L5: he went to
- 227 T: not to just he went [roller skating he went roller skating]
- 228 L5: [roller skating he went roller skating]

VOCABULARY FILE

Vocabulary selection

As well as thinking about context and level, and in relation to both, teachers need to pay attention to vocabulary selection, focusing on high frequency words and giving learners strategies to deal with low frequency words. This is where a corpus can be extremely useful in deciding on which words to teach and to which level.



TASK 9

Look again at the frequency lists for some of the most frequently occurring chunks, taken from the American spoken corpus in COBUILD. Which chunks would you select for a low-intermediate group, which for an advanced group? How did you decide?

WORD FREQUENT CHUNKS

- Time** for a time, at the time, a short time, a long time, most of the time
- Way** the way things are going, the way home, change in the way, in the same way
- End** at the end of, in the end, come to an end, by the end of, towards the end of
- Thing** one thing that, this/that kind of thing, the same thing, the important thing is
- Things** a lot of things, kinds of things, things like that, one of the things

In this chapter, we have seen that a ‘word’ can be represented in any number of ways. It can be a single item (pen), a compound (light-switch), a lexical chunk (fish and chips), or a prepositional phrase (in a few minutes). Combinations of words may be more or less fixed, transparent or context dependent. We need to look beyond individual words and see how words combine when analysing language for teaching.

Chapter review

- 1 In the following compounds, identify the root word and each affix. Complete the table as fully as possible.

Word	Root	Affix(es)
Photographic		
Countries		
Disappointment		
Redundancy		
Irrelevance		

2 To what extent do you think that we should break more complex words into their constituent parts for teaching purposes?

3 Why do phrasal verbs create problems for learners?

4 For each of the following verbs, how many different meanings can you identify? What are the implications for teaching?

To go off

To get by

To make do

To put up

To get through

5 Why should we teach lexical chunks? More than one answer is correct.

a. We find repeated patterns that contribute to fluency.

b. Chunks help to increase formality between speaker and listener.

c. Chunks contain mainly content words.

d. Chunks may be easier to remember and retrieve than single words.

6 In teaching, what are the three most important things to think about when dealing with chunks?

7 What are the underlined parts of these words called and why are they important:

unimportant

laughable

management

8 How many 'words' (compounds, lexical chunks, prepositional phrases) can you make from the following words?

Desk

Shoe

Cup

Tip

9 How many other chunks can you find like the ones below?

Time	for a time, at the time,
Way	change in the way, in the same way
End	at the end of, in the end,

10 Look at the chunks in Question 9. Which ones would you select to teach at a low-intermediate level?