PHRASAL VERBS IN JOB INTERVIEW CONTEXTS: AN ESP APPROACH

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Abstract: *ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students who are in transition from school to the international job market are expected to master English for professional communication in order to make a good impression when they enter the increasingly competitive job market. Communication skills, among other essential soft skills, have always been in high demand since they build relationships and enhance collaboration in any work environment. In order to be able to communicate effectively in real-world settings, they need to master language mechanisms and linguistic expressions.*

The present paper is part of a broader linguistic project, which aims at investigating English for professional communication, with a special focus on the language of job interviews. It starts with an overview of phrasal verbs, concentrating on those which can be used in job interviews by non-native ESP students to confidently market their skills, abilities, talents and knowledge.

Key words: *communication skills; job interviews, phrasal verbs; idiomacity; ESP;*

Communication and the Labour Market

Today's labour market places a great emphasis on the ability to communicate effectively. However, communication is not limited to written documents for employment (such as an effective CV, one-page résumé, cover letter or filling job application forms, among others) or to the exchange of information. It also entails acquiring the ability to surf the labour market, i.e. understanding the job advertisements and job requirements as well as evaluating job offers. Moreover, it transmits messages through non-verbal communication, which encompasses active listening, hand movements, facial expressions, eye-contact, posture among others and which can foster trust and contribute to a positive work environment. The findings of a study conducted last year revealed that, among the most sought after skills by employers in 2024, the ability to communicate effectively was ranked first and has remained unchanged. (Brodnitz C1, Castrillon C1) Consequently, communication skills have become essential non-negotiable requirements, which are included in job descriptions and which are thoroughly assessed during face-to-face or online job interviews.

In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to developing job search skills in an attempt to increase young people's chances of finding employment (Corbanese, Rosas 7).

Indisputably communication plays a critical role in the workplace interaction not only to exchange information and follow instructions but also to build rapport, to solve problems, to collaborate with teams all over the world, breaking down language barriers and increasing productivity. Being able to communicate effectively encompasses oral or verbal communication in an articulate manner (one-on-one conversation, video conferencing, team meetings), visual communication (charts, graphs, diagrams, illustrations, photographs which compress detailed information and are easier to remember), written communication (emails, reports, memos). It also involves the ability to convey ideas and understand others, which leads to deeper connections and fosters mutual respect. The subtleties of language play a crucial role in interpersonal relationships as well as in more formal settings. Furthermore, it entails the ability to communicate across all company levels, i.e. to tailor the message so that it is understood correctly both by individuals and co-workers on the same level of an organization, fostering mutual understanding and inspiring action (horizontal communication) and also by superiors (vertical communication, which can be upward i.e. from a subordinate to a superior or downward, which is vice versa).

To put it in a nutshell, being able to communicate effectively in a foreign language refers to being able to express clear and credible thoughts and emotions, to covey ideas confidently in order to impress, convince and inspire to lead to action. Effective communication is mainly based on a good command of that specific foreign language as well as on confidence. In recent years, ESP teachers have placed great emphasis on developing the communicative competence, regarded as "*not only a significant component but also ultimately the aim of a well-organised and effective ESP course*" (Oštarić, Perinčić 236). Therefore, integrating real-life workplace communication into ESP interactive activities, increases language proficiency, which, in conjunction with self-confidence and self-esteem improves communication skills in professional contexts and contributes to job landing as well as career advancement.

Non-native ESP students enrolled full-time in "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, usually have a strong foundation of general English grammar and vocabulary and most of them are familiar with the specialized, subtechnical or semi technical vocabulary (Popescu 531) of the academic field they chose to major in. At this stage, they need guidance in identifying their strengths, skills, interests, values which are essential in job interviews as well as in creating personal profiles, CVs or the (one-page) résumé, which is a summary of their education, experience and skills, cover letters and other documents needed for employment.

Today, there is a strong tendency among young people to rely exclusively on Artificial Intelligence, with its incredible development and transformation and which can generate texts. What AI cannot do (yet) is to nurture students' self-esteem, which plays a crucial role in their academic accomplishments; it cannot build their confidence, influencing their motivation to learn and cannot teach them how to recognize their value and to embrace a growth mindset. Probably these are just temporary limitations of AI. However, a dedicated ESP teacher can motivate students to face new challenges, increase their confidence by acknowledging their achievements and thus fostering a sense of self-worth through empowerment and autonomy (Israel C1). This can be achieved by incorporating interactive activities such as mock interviews, which determine students to get outside their comfort zone, pushing them to confront their fears. In mock interviews, students are encouraged to objectively assess their skills, strengths and weaknesses and to identify their strong suit in an attempt to improve their critical thinking and to develop their own perspectives. Constructive criticism and learning from experiences and especially from mistakes can help them become more resilient in order to be better prepared to face the world.

Consequently, ESP teachers should be regarded not only as mere facilitators of learning but also as facilitators between the higher education system and the labour market since they focus on their students' specific needs. In order to enhance their employability skills addition, they aim at equipping future graduates with the proper skills and abilities needed to enhance their access to the labour market and to pursue sustainable careers, thus bringing their contribution to undergraduates' lifelong personal and professional development. Moreover, they continuously monitor the labour market developments and requirements and asses its constantly changing demands in an attempt to regularly adapt their teaching materials as well as the educational offer. Another objective is to guide students to become more competitive and better prepared for any work environment. Consequently, English for professional communication can be regarded as a complex and dynamic process, which links education, work and personal growth, thus combining cognitive, social and emotional skills.

Phrasal Verbs – An Overview
It is common knowledge that English is abundant in idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs. Most of them have a figurative meaning which is sometimes difficult to understand as it is different from the literal meaning of the individual words which constitute them.

The category of *multi-word verbs* includes phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, phrasal-prepositional verbs and semi-modal verbs (Pearce 120-121)

Sometimes the term *phrasal verbs* is used to refer to all above-mentioned categories, variant which is preferred in the present study.

Phrasal verbs are indisputably part of every-day speech in English. Research has shown that the coinage of the term *phrasal verb* dates back in the first half of the 20th century (Thim 1) and has been intriguing linguists ever since.

Defined as a "grouping of at least two words (usually a verb and a particle) that, once grouped, has a different meaning than the words would have by themselves" (Mordaunt, McGuire 1), phrasal verbs are, undoubtedly, "an essential part of spoken and written English at all levels" (Hart 7). Some pivotal studies revealed that they consist of "mono-syllabic and non-stative verbs of German origin verbs" and adverbial particles which may be "an adverb or a preposition to form more or less coherent unit of the verb" (Haba 3-8).

Phrasal verbs display certain syntactic configurations: *intransitive phrasal verbs,* which do not take an object, for example *keep up* = maintain, continue, *transitive inseparable phrasal verbs,* which can take an object but the verb cannot be separated from its particle, e.g. *bring up* = raise or tackle a topic; *transitive separable phrasal verbs,* which can be separated by the object that can be placed between the verb and the particle or after the verb, e.g. *bring forward* = propose for discussion; and *three-word transitive inseparable phrasal verbs*, e.g. *put up with* = endure, tolerate.

The syntactic patterns of intransitive phrasal verbs include a verb and an adverb, for instance *level off* = stop changing or developing, stabilize and verb + adverb + noun; verb + noun + adverb; verb + pronoun + adverb for transitive phrasal verbs, for example *inveigh against* = strongly criticize.

Ergative verbs can be both transitive and intransitive. An example in point is *give in.* When it is intransitive, it has the following pattern: verb + adverb and its basic meaning is *surrender*. When it is transitive, its basic meaning is *hand in* and its pattern may involve verb + adverb + noun or verb + noun + adverb or verb + pronoun + adverb.

Difficulties are encountered when dealing with certain associations of verbs (verbal heads) with different prepositions or adverbs that form phrasal verbs which have different meanings in context and which cannot be easily deduced from the meaning of the individual constituents, for example *fall behind* (verb + adverb), *fall for* (verb + preposition), *fall into* (verb + preposition), *fall through* (verb + adverb), *fall under* (verb + adverb).

The idiomaticity of phrasal verbs, which has been extensively researched over the past decades and has always been a challenge for English language learners in general, is mainly due to the fact that the meaning of the second element of the verb (the adverb or preposition) is not necessarily predictable. Regarding the particles of phrasal verbs, Rodriguez-Puente (10)

differentiates between "*reiterative* – where the particle repeats a semantic element already present in the verb, e.g. rise up", "*emphatic* – contain an apparently superfluous which does not alter the meaning of the verb or its argument structure, e.g. wrap up", and "*metaphorical combinations* – encompass combinations whose meanings is quite transparent but somehow removed from its original connotation, e.g. throw away a fortune".

Numerous classifications have been suggested so far, starting with Bolinger (11-18), who distinguished between idiomatic, semi-idiomatic and literal particle verbs in a study published in 1971. Others divide them into literal, aspectual (semi-idiomatic) and idiomatic phrasal verbs (whose meaning cannot be deduced from their constituent elements, e.g. *tell off*) (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 432-433); classify them into non-idiomatic (semantically transparent), semi-idiomatic (whose meaning can be predicted) and fully idiomatic phrasal verbs (whose meaning cannot be deduced from individual words but from the context) (Downing & Locke 508-515); or into figurative (e.g. *wrap up*) and entirely opaque (for example *boil down*) (Liu 17-18) or distinguish between phrasal verbs that have literal or near-literal meaning and others that are more-or-less figurative in meaning, an example in point is *take off*, which can have a literal meaning when referring to aircrafts and a figurative meaning when imitating people's appearance or behaviour to make others laugh (Jackson 6).

In point of formality some linguists see them as informal, colloquial or neutral and "hardly ever formal in register" (Butterfield 201); others point out the phrasal verbs are neither informal nor colloquial (Thim 252) or emphasize that phrasal verbs are not "inherently informal", "some of them are informal, of course, but in this regard they are no different from single-word verbs – the majority are perfectly acceptable and frequently used at all registers" (Hart 6). Research has shown that most phrasal verbs are neutral (Rodriguez-Puente 279). According to Pearce (120-121) when a phrasal verb has the same meaning as a single lexical verb, the phrasal verb has "a more informal quality". However, there are certain phrasal verbs which are commonly used in Academic writing (Liu 209) such as *point out, point up* = highlight*, put forward* (an opinion/ plan/view/theory)*, go into, go/look back over, sum up, write up, carry out* (research), *point out*, *allude to* = refer to and others. In addition, a few phrasal verbs are listed in dictionaries as formal, for example: *impinge on* = affect, *infringe on* = restrict, *indulge in* = take great pleasure in doing something, *inveigh against* = strongly criticize, *permit of* = makes smth. possible, *weary of* = lose interest in, *seek out* = try to find smth. or someone, among others. Consequently, considering the context, purpose and audience, phrasal verbs can be used in a wide range of contexts, which may vary from informal conversations to formal settings. Nevertheless, mastering phrasal

verbs not only improves fluency and language skills but it also enhances "language refinement" (Mordaunt, McGuire 1).

Undeniably, phrasal verbs represent a productive, unstoppable phenomenon, which constantly produces new word combinations.

Phrasal Verbs in Job Interviews

Familiarizing students with the language elements (such as phrasal verbs, idioms, collocations, among others) is a continuous activity which starts with first-year undergraduates, preparing them to face the challenges of a real-life settings. These practice interviews help students understand the complexity of a job interview, the significance of a spontaneous and original answer, improving their communication skills as well as their confidence (Wilkie, Rosendale 3).

Job interviews assess not only the applicant's knowledge, personality traits, and talents but also how they express their opinions and ideas, their body language, eye contact, ability to interact, motivation and how they cope with pressure. In order to do so, the hiring committee usually relies on situational interview questions or scenario-based questions (*What would you do if…)* which make inquiries about future behaviour revealing the candidate's ability to prioritize, to handle difficult situations, to meet deadlines, multitasking, problem-solving among others and behavioural questions (*What did you do when…*) (expanded on in previous work by Opriț-Maftei 2019, 2023), which indicate how they reacted in past situations showing how they were able to face challenges. The STAR method can be successfully applied (Situation, Task, Action, Result) to help them plan their answers. At the same time, other relevant aspects which are encompassed in communication skills are also assessed such as active listening, establishing rapport, ability to stay focused, clarity and concision, confidence and empathy, adaptability and respect.

For better results, it is crucial to help students know their true self-value (through self-assessment and reflection), familiarize them with the vocabulary they need as well as with interview etiquette. The more aware they are of their value, the more confident they become. As a result, they focus more on their strengths and achievements and make confident assertions, which increase their self-esteem and enhance interpersonal dynamics and thus becoming competitive job candidates. In any (job) interview, the applicant's choice of words, posture, eye contact, gestures, head movement, tone of voice show how they perceive themselves, conveying unconscious messages to the audience.

Drawing on David Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory (ELT), which highlights the importance of experience on learning, a job interview simulation is organized at the end of the second semester for the 1st year

undergraduates (detailed in Oprit-Maftei, 2019). David Kolb's (xx) experiential learning theory is explained as "a naturalistic ongoing process of direct learning form life experiences", consisting of four distinct stages: 1. concrete experience (feeling), 2. reflective observation (watching), 3. abstract conceptualization (thinking) and 4. active experimentation (doing). The author stresses that learning is more efficient when it is based on direct experience, observation, analysis and experimentation, i.e. application of knowledge.

Therefore, the main objective of a mock interview is to familiarize undergraduates with interview etiquette. It is efficient in learning how to cope with stressful situations, in understanding the role of small talk, which is essential in establishing rapport with the hiring committee and in assessing non-verbal communication (posture, eye contact, facial expressions, hand gestures). Moreover, undergraduates understand, by objectively assessing their colleagues and providing constructive feedback, the importance of being authentic when giving spontaneous answers to unconventional job interview questions.

ESP students should be constantly encouraged to use collocations, idioms, metaphors and phrasal verbs in mock interviews as they facilitate communication and increase fluency, allowing them to confidently take part in discussions. However, they generally find these word combinations quite challenging as some of them have multiple meanings, some have idiomatic meanings or even metaphorical meanings. Moreover, they sometimes strive to distinguish between literal and figurative meaning, to grasp the difference between them and thus to acquire these word combinations in order to express themselves naturally in English.

Regardless of the presentation type (job interview or presenting research findings) it is recommended to choose the appropriate linguistic register or to switch between language registers (informal to neutral and formal or technical) for successful communication, taking into account the context and the intended audience. The use of phrasal verbs enhances clarity, adds subtle nuances and can elevate persuasive skills (De Marco 104). Although the figurative interpretation of phrasal verbs can be sometimes challenging, it can be deduced from the wider context.

Phrasal verbs are notoriously difficult but an important part of English vocabulary. In order to make conversations more concise and professional, English native speakers choose phrasal verbs to convey their message accurately whereas non-native students of English would prefer to use single-word verbs. ESP students encounter no difficulty in using transparent phrasal verbs, whose meaning can be easily deduced such as *deal with, cut off, find out, figure out, insist on, run into, plug in* and others. However they are more reluctant to use those whose meaning is not that obvious like *defer to, delve into, put off*, *inquire after, take up, seek out, send forth* and avoid using those

which are highly idiomatic and are mainly used in formal English such as *inveigh against* = strongly criticize, *infringe on* = to limit someone's freedom or take away rights, *allude to* = refer to, *impinge on* = affect, among others.

The classification below contains several phrasal verbs which can be used in job interviews and which are grouped under four headings (even though some verbs have several meanings, only the one connected with the following relevant aspects is mentioned):

1. **employment**: *contract out* = to arrange for other people to do a particular job, *draw up* = write, *fix up* a meeting = set up a meeting, *get around* (a problem) = avoid (a problem), *lay off* = make (a worker) redundant, *look for* = search, *pencil in* = establish a meeting, *put in* (for a job) = apply to a company for a job, *resign from, step down* = resign, *turn down* = refuse, reject, seek after = *take on* = employ, *hand in* (your notice) = resign;

2. **experience:** *branch out* = diversify, *bring in* (money), *build up* = increase or become stronger, *carry out* = complete or perform a task, *consist of, cut back (on), firm up* = make a plan more definite, *go through* = be successful, *look back on, plan ahead, follow up* = pursue, *put off* = postpone, *put up with* = tolerate, *run out of* (steam) = lose enthusiasm or energy, *run by* = tell to a superior, *(be) snowed under* = overwhelmed, *start up* a business, *take on* = employ; accept, assume responsibility or task, *take up* = start a job, *take up an offer* = accept an offer, *to get along with (someone), settle for, sign up, work out, get ahead* = make progress, *join in* = participate, *work with* = collaborate*, reach out* = contact someone, *go through* = experience smth.;

3. **personality:** *come up with* (smth.) = think of an idea/plan/solution, *boss (someone) around* = to give orders, *cheer up* = make someone feel better, *fire up* = to fill someone with energy and enthusiasm, *fit in with* = to belong with a group of people, *look forward to* = await with pleasure, *rev up* = become more active, *look up* = improve, *(never) give in, scale back* = reduce, *speak out* = not to be afraid to give an opinion, *speak up* = express one's opinion openly, *spur on* = encourage, *stand for* = tolerate, *stand out* = be noticeable, *stand out (a mile)* = very noticeable, *(never) look back, push ahead* = continue doing smth, with enthusiasm*, urge on* = encourage someone to achieve smth., *knuckle down* = to work/study hard, *count on* = depend on someone;

4. **skills**: *brush up on* = refresh, improve, *keep up with* = stay in contact with/ make progress at the same rate as others*, lay on* = organize, *follow through* = complete smth., *plan ahead* = plan, arrange things in advance, *sort out (problems)* = solve, *work out* = find solutions, *work on* = focus on improving something, *focus on* = give a lot of attention to, *push for/press for* = to take strong action for smth. to happen, *embark on/upon* = start smth. new and important, *resort to* = do smth. because no other choices are possible.

Regarded as an idiomatic phenomenon, phrasal verbs play a fundamental role not only in job interviews but also in corporate

communication as well as business communication in general, which encompasses any sharing of information within organizations, ranging from chairing meetings and delivering dynamic oral presentations to writing reports. The pragmatic implications of phrasal verbs in corporate communication, have been extensively explored by Elena Malyuga (124-132) pointing out the significant role they play in negotiations since they allow natural expression, thus influencing communication.

Drawing on Malyoga's (124) rationale for her research, the frequency of occurrence of phrasal verbs in corporate communication can be accounted for several reasons, out of which we mention the following ones and provide several relevant examples in point:

1. Phrasal verbs are used to synthesise complex information by replacing lengthy explanations and thus to convey the message concisely and effectively, for example: *factor in* = to include a particular fact or situation when thinking about or planning something; give consideration to, *factor out* = to deliberately not include in a calculation, *bottom out* = to reach the lowest point, *contract out* = to arrange for other people to do a particular job, *lay off* = to dismiss workers because there is not enough work, *point out* = make someone aware of smth. that is important, *report back (to)* = to bring information to someone in authority;

2. They enable defensive communication of those who protects their interests as well as cautious attitudes in business negotiations or in resolving conflicts, thus providing a middle ground between formality and informality, for example: *permit of* = makes smth. possible, *bring down* = reduce, *go along with* = support an idea, agree, *weary of* = lose interest in, *hint at* = to suggest indirectly, *strike out* = to try without success, *dispose of* = get rid of someone or smth., *fall through* = fail, *pull out of* = decide to stop being involved in smth., *write off* = to accept that an amount of money has been lost, eliminate;

3. In business communication phrasal verbs are frequently used to add nuances of meaning, for example: *hold off* instead of delay, *let go* instead of fired, *do away with* instead of eliminate, *go under* instead of go bankrupt, *push back* instead of delay, *look over* (a document) instead of examine or inspect, *cut back* instead of reduce, *break down* (data or information) instead of separate into smaller parts, *look into* instead of investigate, *put together* instead of organize, arrange or assemble;

4. They may be used to emphasize something or for a long lasting impact, for example: *go over* (a document) = examine it carefully, *bring about* = cause, *carry out* = implement, *work through* (a problem) = deal with it carefully and thoroughly, *sort out* (a problem) = find a solution, *point out* = give people an important piece of information,

5. They are used in informal communication to speed up communication and add dynamism to language since they foster connections, for example:

check out = inspect, *catch up* = to provide someone with the latest information, *deal with smth.* = to solve a problem or perform a task, *figure out* = understand smth. or find a solution, *map out* = plan*, bring up* = discuss*, drop off* = to decrease, *dry up* = (for supply or resources) to no longer exist or be available, *mount up* = to increase, phase out = to gradually stop using smth., *get back to someone* = reply to smth., to give more information, *team up* = to join with someone to work together, *work something out* = solve smth.by a process of reasoning*, find a solution, run up* = accumulate, *take off* = increase, among others.

Consequently, understanding how these linguistic tools function and familiarizing undergraduates with their idiomatic meanings is crucial as it overcomes language barriers and enhances speed of communication as well as precision.

Conclusions

The present paper aimed at investigating phrasal verbs with a special focus on the language of job interviews, briefly analysing semantic meanings, syntactic patterns and pragmatic functions. Future studies might investigate each of these linguistic dimensions in greater depth, highlighting the significant role played by phrasal verbs in professional communication.

The ESP teacher is expected to engage students and stimulate their interest in using phrasal verbs in context in order to improve their ability to communicate effectively to a degree of fluency and confidence in real-life settings. It also emphasizes the importance of experience-based education since direct learning from life experiences facilitates reflection and learning. In addition to building a strong vocabulary, the ESP teacher is expected to build strong connection with their students in order increase their confidence and self-esteem.

As it was mentioned previously, strong communication skills involve not only verbal skills but also non-verbal communication, written communication, active listening, empathy, assertiveness, diplomacy, spontaneity and originality. They are highly demanded as the labour market needs professionals who are able to express themselves confidently, to negotiate effectively and to build positive relationships.

The present study supports Thim's (252) point of view presented in his comprehensive research, according to which phrasal verbs are neither informal nor colloquial. Due to their idiomatic nature as well as their versatility they might be confusing sometimes but understanding how phrasal verbs work, understanding how people speak English in real life, will definitely boost ESP students' conversational skills and help them gain confidence.

English is famous for being rich in word combinations whose meanings are unpredictable and idiomatic, which may sometimes pose serious difficulties to non-native speakers of English thus creating barriers to understanding and hindering learning. Mastering these word combinations would give ESP learners the upper hand and would sound more like native speakers being able to apply relational communication to professional world.

It is common knowledge that the teaching profession in general and ESP teaching in particular is often demanding as it focuses on the (specific) needs of others but it can be rewarding and it often comes with great job satisfaction as it influences people and shapes characters. Therefore, it is the mission of dedicated teachers to be supportive, to inspire and to see the best in their students in an attempt to help them cope with life's challenges and become better versions of themselves.

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