Perspectives

Approaches to Teaching Phrasal Verbs: Insights from Corpus Research, Instructional Methods, and Cognitive Linguistics

Brian Strong

Phrasal verbs present persistent challenges for second language (L2) learners due to their figurative meanings, multiple interpretations, and variable word order. This article reviews five strands of research that contribute to effective phrasal verb instruction: corpus-based studies, which identify what to teach, and four instructional approaches—input-based, output-based, retrieval-based, and cognitive linguistic—that offer insights into how to teach. Corpus studies identify high-frequency phrasal verbs, common meanings, and register variation, while learner corpus research reveals patterns of underuse and cross-linguistic influence. Instructional studies show that textual enhancement promotes noticing, and output and retrieval tasks improve retention when carefully sequenced. Cognitive linguistic (CL) approaches foster generalization through conceptual metaphors and particle meanings, though their success depends on learner readiness. Despite these advances, most strands have been examined in isolation. This review calls for research on integrated instructional sequences that align corpus-informed selection, CL scaffolding, and retrieval practice. It also highlights the need to investigate how retrieval and communicative output can be coordinated to support durable, flexible phrasal verb use in L2 learning.

Les verbes à particule posent des problèmes persistants aux apprenants d'une langue seconde (L2) en raison de leurs sens figurés, de leurs interprétations multiples et de l'ordre variable des mots. Cet article passe en revue cinq axes de recherche qui contribuent à un enseignement efficace des verbes à particule : les études basées sur des corpus, qui identifient ce qu'il faut enseigner, et quatre approches pédagogiques — basées sur l'intrant, basées sur la production, basées sur la récupération et la linguistique cognitive — qui offrent des éclairages sur la manière d'enseigner ces verbes. Les études de corpus identifient les verbes à particule très fréquents, les sens fréquents et les variations de registre, tandis que les recherches sur les corpus d'apprenants révèlent des tendances de sous-utilisation et d'influence translinguistique. Les études pédagogiques montrent que la mise en évidence du texte favorise la prise de conscience, et que les tâches de production et de récupération améliorent la rétention lorsqu'elles sont soigneusement ordonnées. Les approches de linguistique cognitive (LC) favorisent la généralisation par le biais de métaphores conceptuelles

et des sens des particules, bien que leur succès dépende du degré de préparation de l'apprenant. Malgré ces avancées, la plupart des axes de recherche ont été examinés de manière isolée. Ce texte appelle à des recherches sur des séquences d'enseignement intégrées qui alignent la sélection basée sur le corpus, l'échafaudage offert par la LC et la pratique de récupération. Il souligne également la nécessité d'étudier la manière dont la récupération et la production communicative peuvent être coordonnées pour soutenir l'utilisation durable et flexible des verbes à particule dans l'apprentissage d'une L2.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, phrasal verbs, second language learning, vocabulary instruction

Phrasal verbs—multi-word expressions consisting of a verb and an adverbial particle (e.g., *give up, take down, take out*)—are widely recognized as especially difficult for second language (L2) learners to master (Schmitt & Redwood, 2011; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; White, 2012). These challenges stem from both learner-related and lexical-level factors (Becker, 2014; Condon, 2008; Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Y. Liao & Fukuya, 2004). For instance, one important learner-related factor is cross-linguistic influence, which can affect how easily L2 learners pick up phrasal verbs—especially when their first language (L1) lacks equivalent constructions (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). On the lexical side, phrasal verbs vary in transparency, with some being opaque and difficult to interpret from their component parts (Cornell, 1985).

Given the well-documented challenges associated with phrasal verbs, it is not surprising that research on their teaching and learning has expanded in recent years. However, this growing body of work spans diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, and a comprehensive synthesis of these findings remains lacking. Corpus-based studies have examined the frequency and register-specific distribution of phrasal verbs, providing insights into their usage across different contexts. Instructional research has explored input-based, output-based, and retrieval-based methods, typically within controlled experimental designs. Cognitive linguistic approaches, which emphasize metaphorical and conceptual understanding, have also been proposed as pedagogical alternatives. Yet these strands of research remain largely siloed, with limited integration or cross-comparison. As a result, it remains unclear how different instructional approaches relate to one another or under what conditions they are most effective. This lack of synthesis limits broader understanding of how best to support the teaching and learning of phrasal verbs in L2 contexts.

This review addresses the lack of synthesis by critically examining empirical research on the teaching and learning of phrasal verbs in L2 contexts. It focuses on studies employing corpus-based, experimental, and cognitive linguistic approaches, with particular attention to instructional methods and their effects on learner outcomes. The aim is to identify key patterns, assess the strengths and limitations of current pedagogical practices, and outline directions for future research. In doing so, the review clarifies how different instructional approaches contribute to distinct aspects of phrasal verb development and highlights opportunities for more integrated, evidence-informed instruction.

Corpus-Based Research on the Identification and Usage of Phrasal Verbs by Native English Speakers

Corpus-based research is an empirical approach to language analysis that investigates authentic language use through large, structured collections of naturally occurring texts, known as corpora. Using computational tools, it identifies patterns of word frequency, collocation, syntactic variation, and register differences. Unlike intuition-based or experimental methods, corpus-based research offers quantitative insights into real-world language use, providing a data-driven foundation for both linguistic analysis and pedagogical decision making.

In the study of phrasal verbs, early corpus-based research focused on identifying the most frequently occurring verb–particle combinations in native-speaker English (Gardner & Davies, 2007, 2018; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015; Liu, 2011; Liu & Myers, 2020; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). For example, Gardner and Davies (2007) analyzed the British National Corpus (BNC) and found that just 20 lexical verbs, when combined with eight common particles, accounted for over half of all phrasal verb usage. They also revealed that the 100 most frequent phrasal verbs had an average of 5.6 distinct meaning senses, highlighting their polysemous and cognitively demanding nature for learners.

Subsequent studies built on this frequency-based research by examining how often particular meanings of phrasal verbs occur in authentic usage. Garnier and Schmitt (2015) addressed a key pedagogical gap by introducing the PHrasal VErb Pedagogical (PHaVE) List, which identified the 150 most frequent phrasal verbs in the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) and mapped their dominant meaning senses. Their findings showed that, for most phrasal verbs, just two senses account for over 75% of occurrences—an insight that supports more efficient instructional sequencing and reduces the need to teach every possible meaning.

Later research has examined how the meanings of phrasal verbs vary across registers. Liu and Myers (2020), for example, developed the Spoken and Academic Writing PHaVE (S&A WPHaVE) List by analyzing phrasal verb use in both conversational and academic written English. They found that approximately 70% of the phrasal verbs studied exhibited significant register-specific variation in their dominant meanings. This register-sensitive perspective is essential for aligning phrasal verb instruction with learners' communicative goals—whether for informal conversation or academic writing.

More recently, corpus-based research has turned to the analysis of how L2 learners use phrasal verbs in their own writing. Haugh and Takeuchi (2022), using data from the ICNALE corpus, examined essays written by Japanese and Chinese learners. Their findings showed that L1 typology influenced learners' use of directional, aspectual, and idiomatic phrasal verbs. Learners whose first languages lacked comparable constructions—such as verb-framed Japanese—used fewer phrasal verbs overall, particularly those with figurative meanings, which are common in native English discourse. This line of research marks a significant shift toward understanding learner production and the specific areas where phrasal verb use diverges from native norms.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate how corpus-based research has progressively deepened our understanding of phrasal verbs—from identifying frequent forms to analyzing dominant meanings, mapping register-based variation, and, more recently, examining learner usage. This trajectory reflects a deepening understanding of both how phrasal verbs function in authentic discourse and where learners struggle to approximate native usage. As the field evolves, corpus-based research continues to offer increasingly pedagogically relevant insights—supporting instruction that is informed not only by frequency and meaning but also by learner context and usage realities.

Approaches to the Learning and Teaching of Phrasal Verbs

Input-Based Approaches: Exposure and Noticing

Instructional methods that emphasize input highlight the importance of exposure and learner awareness in learning phrasal verbs (Cornell, 1985; El-Dakhs et al., 2021). These approaches are grounded in Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that conscious attention of linguistic features is necessary for learning. A related concept, input enhancement, involves manipulating input to increase the perceptual salience of specific forms (Sharwood Smith, 1993). One common technique is textual enhancement—for example, bolding or underlining phrasal verbs in authentic texts to draw learners' attention. Although input-based methods do not require active retrieval or production, they support incidental learning by increasing exposure and facilitating initial form–meaning mappings—that is, the learner's ability to connect a linguistic form with its corresponding meaning.

Noticing plays a critical role in phrasal verb learning, as learners often struggle to process phrasal verbs as cohesive units (Haugh & Takeuchi, 2024). Instead, they frequently interpret the verb and particle as separate, unrelated words. This fragmented perception impedes recognition of the semantic and syntactic relationships between components, thereby increasing the difficulty of learning phrasal verbs. Input enhancement addresses this issue by increasing the perceptual salience of phrasal verbs, helping learners to identify and process them as unified, meaningful expressions rather than arbitrary word combinations. By drawing attention to phrasal verbs in context, input enhancement facilitates comprehension and supports subsequent retrieval and production, establishing it as a foundational component of effective phrasal verb instruction.

The effectiveness of input enhancement in facilitating phrasal verb learning has been empirically demonstrated. El-Dakhs et al. (2021) investigated the roles of input enhancement, prior vocabulary knowledge, and semantic opacity—defined as the extent to which a phrasal verb's meaning can be inferred from its components—in a study involving 77 Saudi EFL learners. Participants were divided into three groups: incidental learning, enhanced exposure, and a control group. The incidental learning group read unmodified restaurant reviews; the enhanced exposure group received the same texts with phrasal verbs bolded and underlined; the control group received no exposure to the phrasal verbs. The enhanced exposure group outperformed the others on post-tests, lending support to the Noticing Hypothesis. However, results also revealed that transparent phrasal verbs (e.g., *sit down*) were more readily learned than opaque ones (e.g., *give in*) and that learners with greater vocabulary knowledge benefitted more from incidental learning. In contrast, learners with moderate proficiency showed greater gains from enhanced input. These findings highlight the value of textual enhancement while also emphasizing the role of learner-specific factors in phrasal verb learning.

Tadayonifar et al. (2025) extended prior research by investigating the interaction between definition placement and typographic enhancement in the contextual learning of figurative phrasal verbs. Using a within-subjects design, 85 Persian-speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) learners read short texts containing 42 phrasal verbs. Two variables were manipulated: the timing of definition access (before reading, after reading, or no definitions) and visual salience of phrasal verbs (bolded or unbolded). Post-test results indicated that access to definitions significantly improved recall of both form and meaning. Notably, definitions presented after reading were more effective than those presented beforehand, likely due to the cognitive effort required for inferencing—that is, deriving meaning from context. Typographic enhancement also facilitated learning, particularly when combined with post-reading definitions.

These studies collectively demonstrate that input approaches—especially those combining perceptual salience with strategic support—can significantly enhance the initial stages of phrasal verb learning. Both El-Dakhs et al. (2021) and Tadayonifar et al. (2025) provide converging evidence that textual

enhancement (e.g., bolding or underlining) draws learners' attention to phrasal verbs in context, facilitating the noticing necessary for the form–meaning mapping. Crucially, Tadayonifar et al. (2025) expand this foundation by showing that the post-reading definitions are particularly effective, likely because they promote contextual inferencing, which deepens processing and supports retention—especially for figurative or opaque phrasal verbs. These findings refine and extend the Noticing Hypothesis by highlighting how timing of support and visual cues interact to promote learning. Moreover, they underscore that input-based approaches are most effective when tailored to learners' proficiency levels and when they encourage active cognitive engagement, even in the absence of overt retrieval or production. In sum, input enhancement and strategically timed definitions represent complementary tools that help learners perceive phrasal verbs as cohesive, meaningful units.

Output-Based Approaches: Production and Interaction

Approaches that prioritize language production encourage learners to actively construct, recall, and use linguistic structures, rather than simply recognize them through exposure. These approaches are grounded in Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis, which posits that producing language prompts learners to process linguistic forms more deeply, thereby enhancing accuracy and retention. A key concept in output-based learning is cognitive engagement, which holds that tasks requiring active language use promote deeper processing and stronger memory traces (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). When learners construct, revise, or manipulate sentences, they engage in semantic elaboration, which can reinforce retention and recall.

Output-based approaches play a crucial role in phrasal verb learning by requiring learners to actively retrieve and produce these multi-word expressions, thereby reinforcing both their form and meaning. In contrast to input-based instruction—which provides exposure without necessitating learner output—output-based tasks prompt learners to generate phrasal verbs in meaningful contexts. This active engagement supports stronger retention and more accurate usage. Such approaches are especially valuable given the idiomatic meanings and structural variability of phrasal verbs, which make them challenging to acquire through passive exposure alone. Without opportunities for production, learners may struggle to retrieve and use phrasal verbs spontaneously, limiting their lexical agility and communicative competence. Output-based instruction thus serves as a crucial bridge between passive knowledge and active language use, promoting internalization and facilitating real-world application.

The role of output-based learning in phrasal verb learning has been the focus of several studies examining how instructional approaches affect retention and productive use. Nassaji and Tian (2010), for example, investigated the effects of collaborative versus individual learning on phrasal verb retention using cloze and editing tasks in an intensive English as a second language (ESL) program in Canada. The study involved 26 low-intermediate ESL learners and assessed whether pair work facilitated greater learning gains. Results indicated that collaboration improved task accuracy, likely due to peer scaffolding and feedback; however, it did not lead to significantly greater vocabulary retention. Among the two task types, editing exercises were more effective than cloze tasks, as they promoted form-focused processing and encouraged learners to engage in meaning negotiation.

Building on these findings, Teng (2020) examined how task type (cloze, editing, and writing) and collaborative structure (individual, pair, or group work) affected phrasal verb learning outcomes among 72 low-intermediate Chinese EFL learners at a university in China. Writing tasks produced the highest retention of phrasal verbs, followed by editing tasks, while cloze tasks were the least effective. Group work led to better retention than individual work, with pair work offering intermediate benefits. Notably, editing tasks elicited more peer feedback than writing tasks, reinforcing opportunities for collaborative meaning negotiation. In contrast to Nassaji and Tian (2010), Teng found that collaboration significantly enhanced phrasal verb retention, suggesting that its effectiveness may depend on the complexity of the task.

Taken together, these studies highlight that the benefits of output-based approaches to phrasal verb learning are shaped by both task type and the degree of cognitive engagement they elicit. Tasks that require deeper processing—such as editing and especially writing—consistently lead to stronger retention outcomes than cloze exercises, which offer limited opportunities for semantic elaboration or form–meaning mapping. While both Nassaji and Tian (2010) and Teng (2020) found editing tasks to be more effective than cloze tasks, only Teng reported significant gains from collaborative learning, particularly in group settings. This contrast suggests that the effectiveness of collaboration is not universal but may depend on the complexity and interactive demands of the task. Overall, these findings support the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005) by demonstrating that producing language in cognitively demanding, socially interactive context can enhance phrasal verb learning. They also align with the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), emphasizing that tasks prompting greater learner involvement—through need, search, and evaluation—are more likely to result in durable vocabulary learning.

Retrieval-Based Learning and Feedback: Memory Retrieval and Correction of Errors

Retrieval-based learning and feedback-focused approaches emphasize active recall as a fundamental mechanism for strengthening long-term retention. Grounded in retrieval practice theory, this perspective holds that actively recalling information leads to more robust memory consolidation than passive review (Roediger & Butler, 2011). A key demonstration of this principle is the testing effect—the finding that retrieval improves retention more than simply rereading or restudying the material (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011). However, the benefits of retrieval depend critically on the accuracy of what is recalled. As Metcalfe (2017) notes, retrieving incorrect information without corrective feedback can entrench errors. Timely and informative feedback plays a crucial role in ensuring that errors are addressed, allowing learners to refine memory traces and improve subsequent recall accuracy.

In a pair of studies, Strong and Boers (2019a, 2019b) examined how retrieval-based learning compares to trial-and-error approaches in the acquisition of phrasal verbs by Japanese EFL learners. First, an analysis of 44 EFL textbooks revealed that 61% relied on trial-and-error tasks that required learners to guess meanings before receiving feedback, a practice that risks reinforcing erroneous interpretations. In an experimental study with 140 university students, learners who studied phrasal verbs before completing exercises (retrieval-based condition) significantly outperformed those who guessed meanings prior to feedback (trial-and-error condition), with 25% of errors in the latter group persisting despite correction. A follow-up study further explored how feedback timing and item grouping influenced outcomes. Learners were assigned to conditions involving either individual or grouped phrasal verb presentation and received either immediate or delayed feedback. While retrieval-based exercises initially led to greater gains, these advantages diminished over time, and all groups showed poor performance on delayed post-tests. Together, these findings underscore the importance of structured retrieval with immediate feedback and suggest that trial-and-error—even when followed by correction—can lead to the entrenchment of errors. They also highlight the need for spaced retrieval to sustain long-term phrasal verb retention.

Collectively, research on retrieval-based learning and feedback underscores the pedagogical value of structured recall in fostering durable vocabulary knowledge—particularly for complex multi-word expressions like phrasal verbs. While the testing effect establishes that active retrieval strengthens retention, its effectiveness depends on timely feedback that corrects errors before they become entrenched (Metcalfe, 2017). The two studies by Strong and Boers (2019a, 2019b) provide important empirical support for this principle, showing that trial-and-error learning, even when followed by feedback, may lead to the persistence of incorrect form–meaning associations. In contrast, retrieval-based methods with prior study and immediate corrective feedback promote greater accuracy and longer-lasting retention. However, the decline in performance over time highlights the need for spaced retrieval to sustain learning gains. Despite

these valuable insights, empirical research in this area remains limited, with few studies directly comparing retrieval-based and feedback-enhanced approaches to phrasal verb learning. More research is needed to explore how factors such as spacing, feedback timing, and learner proficiency interact to shape the effectiveness of retrieval-based instruction. Until then, the available evidence supports prioritizing structured recall and immediate correction as foundational strategies in phrasal verb pedagogy.

Cognitive Linguistic Approaches: Conceptual Understanding and Generalization

Cognitive linguistic (CL) frameworks propose that word meanings follow systematic patterns and are based on conceptual relationships rather than being entirely arbitrary (Boers, 2000; Condon & Kelly, 2002; Kovecses & Szabcó, 1996; Spring & Horie, 2013; Yasuda, 2010). These approaches are grounded in the belief that meaning emerges from underlying cognitive structures, allowing learners to infer relationships between linguistic elements rather than relying on rote memorization (Morgan, 1997). A core construct in CL-based instruction is metaphor awareness, which posits that language frequently derives from conceptual metaphors and schematic meanings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, conceptual metaphors shape how speakers extend meaning from one domain to another, reinforcing the idea that words and expressions are linked to broader cognitive frameworks (Spring & Horie, 2013; Yasuda, 2010).

Another theoretical foundation is event conflation theory, which explains how linguistic particles systematically contribute to meaning. Rather than being arbitrary, recurrent semantic patterns provide structured cues, enabling learners to interpret unfamiliar word combinations based on underlying cognitive principles (Spring, 2018). The structured nature of CL approaches suggests potential benefits for areas of language learning where meaning relationships are complex and difficult to infer through direct memorization alone.

CL approaches are particularly significant for phrasal verb learning, as phrasal verb meanings are often opaque and challenging for learners (Al-Otaibi, 2019). Unlike single-word verbs, phrasal verbs encode conceptual relationships, making them difficult to learn through rote memorization alone (Boers, 2000). By highlighting recurring semantic patterns, CL instruction helps learners internalize meaning relationships, leading to greater retention and more efficient application of phrasal verbs (Yasuda, 2010).

This is especially important for learners whose first language (L1) lacks phrasal verb equivalents, as CL-based instruction provides conceptual tools for inferring meaning that would otherwise be unavailable (Condon, 2008). Additionally, by reducing cognitive load through structured meaning relationships, CL instruction enhances long-term retention and fosters a more intuitive understanding of phrasal verbs, reinforcing its importance in second language learning (Spring, 2018). The effectiveness of CL approaches in phrasal verb learning has been empirically tested, with studies examining how conceptual metaphor instruction, event conflation theory, and structured particle-based learning influence retention and generalization.

Yasuda (2010) examined the impact of explicit metaphor awareness training on Japanese EFL learners' learning of phrasal verbs. Using a quasi-experimental design with 115 university students, the study compared traditional translation-based instruction to cognitive linguistic (CL) instruction focused on orientational metaphors. While both groups improved on taught phrasal verbs, the CL group significantly outperformed the control group on novel phrasal verbs, indicating better generalization. Yasuda concluded that explicit metaphor instruction is especially beneficial for learners whose first language differs typologically from English, as it fosters conceptual understanding rather than rote memorization, aiding long-term phrasal verb learning and application.

Lu and Sun (2017) examined the role of metaphor association and orientational metaphors in phrasal verb learning among 120 Chinese EFL learners. Using a 2 × 2 experimental design (traditional vs. cognitive instruction; intermediate vs. advanced proficiency), the researchers assessed learners through immediate

and delayed post-tests. Results indicated that metaphor association facilitated long-term retention, whereas orientational metaphors had little effect. These findings align with cognitive linguistic principles, suggesting that metaphor-based instruction is most effective when it aligns with learners' cognitive and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, proficiency level influenced learning outcomes, with advanced learners benefitting more from metaphor-based instruction than intermediate learners, reinforcing the role of cognitive development in phrasal verb learning.

Spring (2018) integrated CL principles into a structured instructional framework, investigating whether teaching phrasal verbs through a systematic particle list based on event conflation theory improved retention among L1 Japanese learners of English. The study compared two instructional methods: a whole-unit memorization approach, where learners studied phrasal verbs as fixed expressions, and a conflation-based approach, where phrasal verbs were grouped by particle meanings. Results showed that the conflation-based group significantly outperformed the whole-unit group, particularly in recognizing and applying less common phrasal verbs. Learners in the cognitive group reported that focusing on particle meanings helped them infer the meanings of novel phrasal verbs, reinforcing the claim that CL-based instruction facilitates generalization and reduces reliance on rote memorization.

F.-H. Liao (2019) extended research on conceptual metaphor instruction and phrasal verb comprehension among Taiwanese EFL learners. The study compared three instructional approaches: a traditional method relying on direct translation, a CL-based method, and a CL-plus method incorporating Mandarin explanations. Findings revealed that both CL groups significantly outperformed the traditional instruction group, confirming that conceptual metaphor instruction enhances phrasal verb comprehension. However, incorporating L1 lexical items did not yield additional benefits, suggesting that cross-linguistic explanations may not always support metaphor awareness. Additionally, certain metaphorical extensions (e.g., "out" meaning completion) were easier to learn than others, emphasizing the need for careful selection of instructional materials.

Taken together, these studies suggest that cognitive linguistic (CL) instruction enhances phrasal verb learning by enabling learners to identify recurring semantic patterns and apply them to novel expressions. Across studies, metaphor-based instruction was consistently associated with improved retention and the ability to generalize beyond taught items (F.-H. Liao, 2019; Lu & Sun, 2017; Yasuda, 2010). However, findings also show that the effectiveness of CL approaches varies depending on factors such as learner proficiency (Lu & Sun, 2017) and the complexity or familiarity of metaphorical extensions (F.-H. Liao, 2019). Event conflation theory, as applied by Spring (2018), further demonstrates that grouping phrasal verbs by particle meaning can facilitate inference and reduce reliance on rote memorization—especially for lower-frequency items. While results consistently support CL principles, they also highlight the need for careful scaffolding and learner-sensitive design. Overall, CL approaches appear most effective when instruction aligns with learners' cognitive readiness and includes explicit support for meaning-based reasoning.

Synthesis of Research on Phrasal Verb Learning and Instruction

Research on phrasal verb learning has developed along five major strands: corpus-based analysis, input-based instruction, output-based practice, retrieval-based learning, and cognitive linguistic approaches. While these strands vary in scope and focus, each contributes to our understanding of how phrasal verbs are learned and taught. Corpus-based research has played a foundational role by identifying the centrality of phrasal verbs to English communication. It has evolved from mapping phrasal verb frequency (Gardner & Davies, 2007) to analyzing their most common meaning senses (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015) and variation across registers (Liu & Myers, 2020). Most recently, corpus studies have extended to learner production, showing how phrasal verb use varies by L1 background and proficiency (Haugh & Takeuchi, 2022). This trajectory has clarified which phrasal verbs are pedagogically relevant and where learner usage diverges

from native patterns. Input-based approaches emphasize noticing and initial form–meaning mapping. Textual and typographic enhancement, especially when paired with delayed definitions, support the learning of opaque phrasal verbs (El-Dakhs et al., 2021; Tadayonifar et al., 2025). Output-based instruction promotes active control over phrasal verb use through collaborative writing, editing, and speaking tasks. While studies have shown benefits for retention and accuracy, their impact appears to depend on task complexity and learner engagement (Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Teng, 2020). Retrieval-based learning consistently enhances long-term retention through active recall and immediate feedback. Compared to trial-and-error guessing, retrieval practice leads to more accurate and durable phrasal verb learning (Strong & Boers, 2019a, 2019b). CL approaches support conceptual understanding by helping learners infer meanings from underlying metaphors and particle semantics. This scaffolding facilitates generalization across phrasal verbs and reduces reliance on rote memorization (Spring, 2018; Yasuda, 2010).

Taken together, these strands offer complementary insights into different stages and dimensions of phrasal verb learning. Corpus studies inform what to teach and highlight usage patterns; input-based methods support initial exposure; output and retrieval reinforce productive use and memory; and CL instruction builds the conceptual foundations needed for inference and generalization. Yet most studies examine these strands in isolation. Future research should explore how to coordinate them in sequenced instructional models that reflect the real-world demands of learning phrasal verbs—moving from identification to noticing, control, retention, and flexible use.

Bridging Research and Practice: Classroom Applications

The synthesis above highlights how diverse strands of research—corpus-based, input-oriented, output-focused, retrieval-driven, and cognitively grounded—can be aligned to support the complex task of phrasal verb learning. Yet, while theoretical models emphasize integration, instructional practices often remain fragmented, with few studies demonstrating how these approaches can be implemented in classroom contexts. To begin addressing this gap, in this section we present two classroom-ready strategies drawn from the most consistently supported research areas: retrieval-based instruction and metaphor awareness training. These approaches illustrate how empirically grounded principles can be translated into concrete teaching practices that foster both retention and generalization.

Retrieval-Based Instruction

Retrieval-based instruction, which engages learners in recalling target items from memory, has consistently been shown to strengthen form–meaning connections and promote durable vocabulary retention (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011; Roediger & Butler, 2011). In the context of phrasal verbs, Strong and Boers (2019a, 2019b) demonstrated that retrieval tasks were more effective than trial-and-error guessing, particularly when immediate feedback was provided. In classroom settings, teachers might begin by selecting 8 to 10 high-frequency, semantically transparent phrasal verbs related to a common theme (e.g., travel or daily routines). The PHaVE List (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015) can support this selection. Instruction could begin with a short dialogue or narrative to provide context, followed by classification or matching tasks to establish initial understanding. Follow-up lessons can incorporate spaced retrieval activities. For example, learners might complete gap-fill tasks where either the verb or particle is omitted (e.g., "She didn't know the answer, so she had to ____ it ____," targeting *figure it out*). Immediate feedback should be provided to clarify meaning and correct errors. Peer discussion during these activities can further encourage metalinguistic awareness and reduce anxiety—both factors that support vocabulary learning.

Metaphor Awareness Training

A second instructional strategy draws on cognitive linguistic research, which has shown that phrasal verb particles often carry systematic conceptual meanings (Boers, 2000; Spring, 2018). As discussed earlier, Yasuda (2010) found that metaphor-awareness training helped learners generalize knowledge of phrasal verbs to untaught items by emphasizing recurring conceptual patterns. A metaphor-awareness lesson might begin with a visual schema illustrating the meaning associated with a particle such as *up* (e.g., completion or upward movement). Learners then examine phrasal verbs grouped by shared particle meanings, such as *pack up*, *clear up*, *cheer up*, and *brighten up*, and explore how each particle contributes to meaning. Students can then create original sentences or short dialogues to reinforce both structural understanding and semantic patterns. Although not all phrasal verbs conform to neat metaphorical patterns, introducing these regularities can reduce learners' dependence on rote memorization and facilitate inference. As noted by F.-H. Liao (2019), some metaphorical extensions are more accessible than others, and cross-linguistic explanations may not always be beneficial. Teachers should therefore select examples carefully and provide appropriate scaffolding based on learners' linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels.

These two approaches—retrieval-based practice and metaphor-awareness training—offer complementary pedagogical benefits. Retrieval supports durable learning through effortful recall and feedback, while metaphor-based instruction provides learners with conceptual tools for interpreting and generalizing unfamiliar expressions. When used together in the classroom, these methods can strengthen both memory and meaning-making in ways that are grounded in empirical research.

While this section has illustrated how each approach can be applied in isolation, future classroom applications should explore how they can be combined in coherent instructional sequences. Teachers might begin with metaphor-awareness activities to establish core meaning patterns, followed by retrieval practice to consolidate these meanings through spaced recall. Adapting these approaches to diverse learners—across L1 backgrounds, proficiency levels, and instructional formats—remains an important area for future pedagogical work.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Research on phrasal verb learning has advanced across four major strands: corpus-based analysis, instructional methodologies, retrieval-based learning, and CL approaches. Together, these lines of inquiry provide valuable insights into how learners encounter, process, and retain phrasal verbs. Corpus-based studies, for example, have documented frequency patterns, polysemy, and register variation, offering empirical tools for instructional prioritization. However, their pedagogical applications remain limited. Frequency and register data could inform curriculum design tailored to specific communicative contexts—such as informal speaking or academic writing—but few studies have examined how to incorporate these insights systematically. Similarly, output-based instruction shows promise for promoting phrasal verb production, but its effects on spontaneous use and long-term retention remain under-investigated and largely confined to small-scale interventions.

Retrieval-based learning has emerged as a particularly effective approach for promoting durable memory, especially when immediate feedback follows recall attempts. Yet questions remain about how best to structure retrieval over time, correct persistent errors, and sustain learning through spaced practice. CL approaches contribute additional value by promoting generalization through metaphor awareness and particle semantics, but their effectiveness depends on learner proficiency, L1 background, and the accessibility of specific metaphors. A key direction for future research is the development of instructional

sequences that align these complementary approaches—e.g., using corpus-informed selection to identify high-frequency phrasal verbs, employing CL strategies to build conceptual understanding, and incorporating retrieval practice to reinforce and consolidate learning. Few studies have investigated how these elements can be effectively sequenced or adapted across learner populations.

Technology-enhanced environments offer a promising means of supporting such integrated instruction. Mobile apps and adaptive platforms could deliver spaced retrieval, immediate feedback, and repeated exposure to high-frequency phrasal verbs tailored to learners' goals and proficiency levels. Future studies should examine not only learning outcomes but also engagement, strategy use, and transfer to communicative contexts. Additionally, the interaction between different types of output—such as retrieval-based production for memory consolidation and communicative production for fluent use—deserves further investigation, particularly in relation to sequencing and scaffolding. Finally, given that much existing research comes from a small group of scholars, broader replication across diverse learner groups and instructional contexts is essential. Together, these lines of inquiry can contribute to a robust, evidence-based framework for phrasal verb instruction—one that supports durable retention, conceptual understanding, and flexible, context-sensitive language use.

The Author

Brian Strong is an assistant professor at Carleton University. His research interests are in second language acquisition, with a focus on optimizing vocabulary learning and teaching. He also investigates the effects of reading of second language development.

References

Al-Otaibi, G. M. (2019). A cognitive approach to the instruction of phrasal verbs: Rudzka-Ostyn's model. *Journal of Language and Education*, *5*(2), 10–25. https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2019.8170

Becker, T. (2014). Avoidance of English phrasal verbs: Investigating the effect of proficiency, learning context, task type, and verb type. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, *24*, 1–33.

Boers, F. (2000). Metaphor awareness and vocabulary retention. *Applied Linguistics*, *21*(4), 553–571. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/21.4.553

Condon, N. (2008). How cognitive linguistic motivations influence the learning of phrasal verbs. In F. Boers & S. Lindstromberg (Eds.), *Cognitive linguistic approaches to teaching vocabulary and phraseology* (pp. 133–158). Mouton de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110199161.2.133

Condon, N., & Kelly, P. (2002). Does cognitive linguistics have anything to offer English language learners in their efforts to master phrasal verbs? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *137*, 205–231.

Cornell, A. (1985). Realistic goals in the teaching and learning of phrasal verbs. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *23*(4), 269–280. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1985.23.1-4.269

Dagut, M., & Laufer, B. (1985). Avoidance of phrasal verbs: A case for contrastive analysis. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *7*(1), 73–79. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100005167

El-Dakhs, D. A. S., Sonbul, S., & Alwazzan, R. (2021). Learning phrasal verbs in the EFL classroom: The effect of prior vocabulary knowledge and opacity. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *60*(4). https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2020.0116

Gardner, D., & Davies, M. (2007). Pointing out frequent phrasal verbs: A corpus-based analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, *41*(2), 339–359. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2007.tb00062.x

Gardner, D., & Davies, M. (2018). Sorting them all out: Exploring the separable phrasal verbs of English. *System*, *76*, 197–209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.06.009
Garnier, M., & Schmitt, N. (2015). The PHaVE List: A pedagogical list of phrasal verbs and their most frequent meaning senses. *Language Teaching Research*, *19*(6), 645–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168814559798
Haugh, S., & Takeuchi, O. (2024). Learner knowledge of English phrasal verbs: Awareness, confidence, and learning experiences. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *34*(2), 656–671. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12523
Karpicke, J. D., & Blunt, J. R. (2011). Retrieval practice produces more learning than elaborative studying with concept mapping. *Science*, *331*(6018), 772–775. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1199327
Kovecses, Z., & Szabcó, P. (1996). Idioms: A view from cognitive semantics. *Applied Linguistics*, *17*(3), 326–355. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.3.326
Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, *4*(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4
Laufer, B., & Eliasson, S. (1993). What causes avoidance in L2 learning: L1-L2 difference, L1-L2 similarity, or L2 complexity? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *15*(1), 35–48. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100011657
Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. H. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics*, *22*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/22.1.1
Liao, F.-H. (2019). Making sense of "out" phrasal verbs: The instruction of "out" senses. *RELC Journal*, *51*(3), 364–380. http://doi.org/10.1177/0033688219828199
Liao, Y., & Fukuya, Y. (2004). Avoidance of phrasal verbs: The case of Chinese learners of English. *Language Learning*, *54*(2), 193–226. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2004.00254.x
Liu, D. (2011). The most frequently used English phrasal verbs in American and British English: A multicorpus examination. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*(4), 661–688. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2011.247707
Liu, D., & Myers, D. (2020). The most-common phrasal verbs with their key meanings for spoken and academic written English: A corpus analysis. *Language Teaching Research*, *24*(3), 403–424. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168818798384
Lu, Z., & Sun, J. (2017). Presenting English polysemous phrasal verbs with two metaphor-based cognitive methods to Chinese EFL learners. *System*, *69*, 153–161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.07.016
Metcalfe, J. (2017). Learning from errors. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *68*(1), 465–489. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010416-044022
Morgan, P. S. (1997). Figuring out *figure out*: Metaphor and the semantics of the English verb-particle construction. *Cognitive Linguistics*, *8*(4), 327–358. https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.1997.8.4.327
Nassaji, H. & Jun, Tian. (2010). Collaborative and individual output tasks and their effects on learning English phrasal verbs. *Language Teaching Research*, *14*(4), 397–419. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168810375364
Roediger, H. L., III, & Butler, A. C. (2011). The critical role of retrieval practice in long-term retention. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *15*(1), 20–27. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2010.09.003
Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *11*(2), 129–158. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/11.2.129
Schmitt, N., & Redwood, S. (2011). Learner knowledge of phrasal verbs: A corpus-informed study. In F. Meunier, S. De Cock, G. Gilquin, & M. Paquot (Eds.), *A taste for corpora: In honour of Sylviane Granger* (pp. 173–208). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.45.12sch
Sharwood Smith, M. (1993). Input enhancement in instructed SLA: Theoretical bases. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *15*(2), 165–179. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100011943

Siyanova, A., & Schmitt, N. (2007). Native and nonnative use of multi-word vs one-word verbs. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, *45*(2), 109–139. https://doi.org/10.1515/IRAL.2007.005

Spring, R. (2018). Teaching phrasal verbs more efficiently: Using corpus studies and cognitive linguistics to create a particle list. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, *9*(5), 121. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.9n.5p.121

Spring, R., & Horie, K. (2013). How cognitive typology affects second language acquisition: A study of Japanese and Chinese learners of English. *Cognitive Linguistics*, *24*(4), 689–710. https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2013-0024

Strong, B., & Boers, F. (2019a). The error in trial and error: Exercises on phrasal verbs. *TESOL Quarterly*, *53*(2), 289–319. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.478

Strong, B., & Boers, F. (2019b). Weighing up exercises on phrasal verbs: Retrieval versus trial-and-error practices. *The Modern Language Journal*, *103*(3), 562–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12579

Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook on research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 471–483). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tadayonifar, M., Elgort, I., & Siyanova-Chanturia, A. (2025). Contextual learning and retention of phrasal verbs: The effects of definition placement and typographic enhancement. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *47*(1), 157–180. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263124000718

Teng, M. F. (2020). The effectiveness of group, pair and individual output tasks on learning phrasal verbs. *The Language Learning Journal*, *48*(2), 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2017.1373841

White, B. J. (2012). A conceptual approach to the instruction of phrasal verbs. *The Modern Language Journal*, *96*(3), 419–438. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2012.01365.x

Yasuda, S. (2010). Learning phrasal verbs through conceptual metaphors: A case of Japanese EFL learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, *44*(2), 250–273. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.219945