

Chapter 2

Delexicalised verbs

In the first part of this two part article Shaun Dowling looks at delexicalised verbs, and the problems they cause for our students.

- Where they come from
- Meaning
- Delexicalised verbs and collocations
- Learner perceptions of meaning and choice

I remember in one of my first classes a young law student who was studying with me, saying that if he didn't know what verb to use he would say **'get'** as it is usually 90% of the time right. At the time we laughed and I said that this wasn't completely true and moved on quickly without giving him any help. As many teachers may know the word **'get'** can seem to be a pretty complicated verb to deal with in your first few classes.

Of course, my student in this statement was generalizing, but what he had done was to notice the use of what is probably one of the most common verbs in the language, the delexicalised verb. By telling me this, he had also shown me that he had realized the high frequency use of the verb and even the multiple meaning it has and I had unfortunately not.

With this in mind, let's look at **'get'** further and the importance of the delexicalised verbs. Lets see how right, rather than wrong, my students was and how we can deal with these words in our day to day teaching.

Where they come from

Concordance programmes have helped us become far more aware of how the language is used and the choices native speakers make when selecting words. One of the most important findings is the use of delexicalised verbs.

- Before we go any further, stop reading for a minute and see how many collocations you can make with **'get'**.
Did you think of many?

- Try this with your students at any level and I'm sure you'll be surprised, especially at an intermediate level, how many they themselves know.
- So here are some delexicalised verbs are.

get go take make do have give set put

They are some of the most frequently used verbs in the language (if not the most frequent) and if you look in a dictionary you will see the multiple meaning each of them have. These meanings can make life difficult for the teacher but lets have a look at how this can be addressed.

Meaning

Once again let us go back with '**get**' and the problems a verb like this could cause our learners. For some reason we may feel it is the most complicated verb there is and difficult to teach. One example of this is demonstrated when you click on online dictionaries, such as the useful Cambridge on line dictionary. Under the word '**get**' you can scroll down pages of different meanings. It is enough to make your mind boggle. Do this same activity with the other verbs mentioned and you should find the similar results.

- The problem here is that most dictionaries looks at this word in isolation (a single word) but as I asked you to do in the first get exercise, in word combinations; dealing with multiple meaning is much easier. It is difficult for dictionaries to give definitions and examples of the many different delexicalised verbs and how they are used because there are so many different words that they collocate with.

Delexicalised verbs and collocations

It is almost impossible then to see delexicalised verbs by themselves. They must be seen with other words that form around them. The main form they can be seen in is collocations.

- In the original get task above. Maybe you came up with the collocations
 - get married,
 - get a divorce
 - get ready
 - get worse
 - get a drink
 - get angry
 - get home

If we look at this list, where is the main part of the meaning? Is it in the word **'get'** or in the accompanying word(s)?

Yes, it is the second word that carries most of the meaning. Parrot (2000) calls these (the much easier to say and type) "*empty verbs*", rather than the tongue twisting delexicalised verbs. "*Empty*" because as he states "*they contribute little or no meaning to the expression*". Therefore, the meaning must be carried in the whole collocation but it is mainly found in the words following our delexicalised verb.

Learner perceptions of meaning and choice

Where I work in Brazil, it is easy for learners to avoid the use of collocations with delexicalised verbs. Here are some examples of what they say in English, maybe you'll find it similar if you are teaching another Latin based languages.

Here is an example:

"I think Brazil is progressing this year. One example is I visited the cinema last week and I arrived there and there was a big line of people to see Brazilian films."

Nothing grammatically wrong there you may think but it sounds a bit strange. You may choose to correct line for queue but the 'strangeness' the native listener may perceive is due to the avoidance I mentioned above of the speaker. A more realistic performance would have been:

"I think Brazil is **making** progress this year. One example is I **went to** the cinema last week and I **got** there and there was a big line of people to see Brazilian films."

From my work in the classroom my students make these choices mainly because of the problems with not just translation but the small amount of meaning delexicalised verbs carry. Let's now look at these problems I have discussed this extract in closer detail to try and see why they occur.

➤ **'Progressing' instead of 'making progress'**

This is because in my students L1 it is more common to choose the verb progress than make the collocation choice. '*Progress*' has the meaning here, as stated before the delexicalised verb has little. Students choose words based on their meaning and as progress has the whole meaning then the natural choice for them seems to be different from a native speaker choice of '*make progress*'.

It is like 'wash *the dishes*' instead of '*do*' the dishes. It can seem very subtle but seem somewhat strange when being heard by a native speaker.

➤ **'Visited' the cinema instead of 'went to' the cinema.**

This is similar to the next choice of arrive there instead of get there. '*Chegar*' meaning arrive, is a straight Portuguese translation. This is not the choice a native speaker would say, '*get there*' later. Again the meaning was correctly chosen by the learner but if we are to improve their performance we must offer them the alternative that sounds natural. '*Arrive*' (as with visit) gives the speaker the clear understanding of the sequence of actions. The meaning is not clear to someone who would be used to hearing '*get there*' and so some level of adjustment would need to be made by the native speaker listener.

We can see then that these meaning and translation problems are something teachers must be aware of. In order to make our learners speech more authentic sounding, constant attention to the choices they make can help us do just that.

In the second part of this article I'll look more closely at a range of classroom activities that we can use to help our students with this area.

Delexicalised verbs 2

In the **first part** of this article the writer explored the use of delexicalised verbs and the problems they create for our learners. He now goes on to outline some ways in which we can help our learners with this tricky area and help them to make their English sound more natural.

- Using student knowledge
- Materials light activities
 - Round in circles
 - Delexicalised verb drill
- Delexicalised choices
- Conclusion

It must be stressed here that delexicalised verbs are used far more in speaking (Carter and McCarthy) than writing. They are high frequency spoken words. Avoiding their use may make the learner sound formal or strange. In order to attain more naturally sounding speaking performance regular attention to the use of these verbs is obviously necessary. Reformulation of students spoken discourse is a valuable technique to help learners notice the use of these verbs when avoidance takes place.

Using student knowledge

Previously, I suggested you try finding out how many word combinations your students know with '**get**'. The nice thing I have found about delexicalised verbs is that students tend to take them in their stride. They see and hear them in texts all of the time and the meaning is dealt with by the other words around them, so when learners have a chance to notice this language pattern it gives them a strategy for improving their performance.

Our learners are language learners and like to have insights into how the language works and be given strategies and priorities for improving their performance. By doing this they may be able to take the role of the listener and notice the strange way that language sounds without the delexicalised verb choice.

Having learners experiment with these verbs in combinations helps consolidate their use. Students have a lot of knowledge and as stated, see these verbs a lot in many different text types. I try and give my learners opportunities to use this '*known language*' when concentrating on delexicalised verbs.

Materials light activities

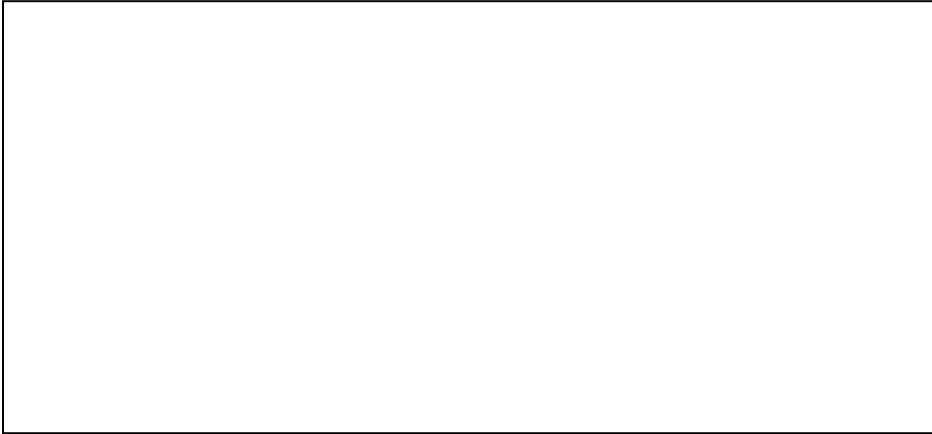
I would like to say the sooner you start teaching delexicalised verbs in their collocations the better but many of my colleagues prefer to start at intermediate levels where the students seem to be hitting the intermediate plateaux or are demanding more vocabulary and less grammar. Here are some activities that may help make the step of sensitizing your own learners to these verb types.

Round in circles

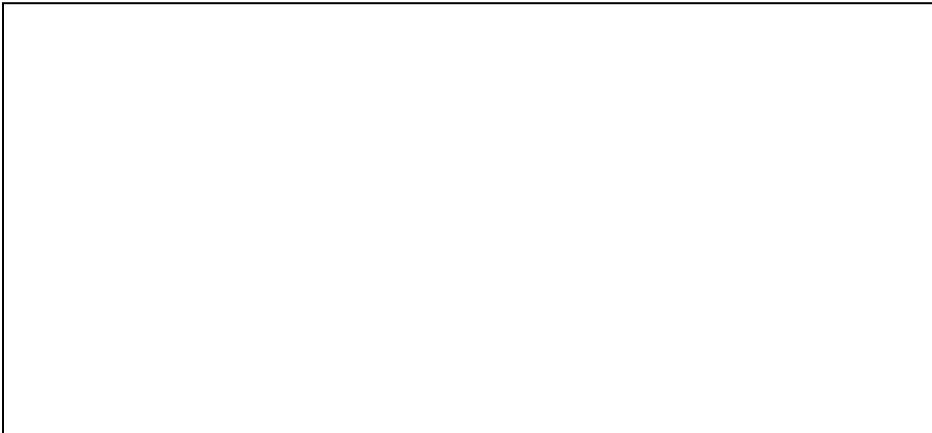
- Have students seated in a circle either around a table, if on chairs, or on the floor.
- Get slips of paper and on each one, write a delexicalised verb. Make about 20 slips so you may repeat the delexicalised verbs. Then mix them up like a pack of cards and place the slips in the middle of the group.
- Now have one person pick up a verb/slip of paper
- After telling the class the verb on the slip, they must say a collocation using the delexicalised verb.
- Then going round the circle the other members of the group must do the same without repeating the same combination.
- When one person cannot think of a word combination with the verb they can then choose a new slip of paper with a new verb and the game continues.
- The game finishes when the entire group have taken all of the cards.

Exercise 1

1. What are the ways that you will use to teach students lexis?



2. List a few examples that show how you would teach lexis.



Chapter 3

Delexicalised verb drill

Pre class preparation

- Before class choose 3 or 4 delexicalised verbs to look at with your students
- Write all of the second half of the clearly on pieces of paper (A3 size) so the students will be able to read it if you stand in the front.
- Routines for example can use collocations such as:-

to bed	to work	a few beers	a shower
the car to work	medicine	tired	ready

In Class

- Tell the students you are going to teach them 4 words (i.e. go, get, take, have) and write them on the board. When the students have acknowledged this, and maybe found it strange as it is so easy, rub them off the board for them to remember.
- Now in front of the class have the slips showing and change them around as the students call out the delexicalised verb have them say whole collocation. The delexicalised verb and the word(s) on the slips.

Monitor students for correct connected speech pronunciation especially of **'get'** and **'make'** where the final consonant sound is dropped or the **'go'** verb when at times there is assimilation.

- When they have finished have the learners write as many down as they can remember.

I find this practical when introducing new themes to speak about. By trying to keep the language level based on the students current knowledge this allows them to start using rather than avoiding these collocations.

Delexicalised choices

A good resource for this activity is the Oxford Dictionary of Collocations there is list of some common forms of delexicalised verbs and their collocations.

- Have students write in their note books the verbs you have chosen. Read out the second part of the collocation and get the learners to write them down under the correct verb
- After you have given about 30 words, in pairs, students compare lists (sometimes there could be more than one verb to a combination) and see under which verb they have chosen to place the second part of the collocation.
- As a class check the answers and have students discuss what patterns they have found. Then during every future class, when a new delexicalised verb is found either by your students or yourself the learners can add them to the list first students.

Conclusion

As my law student had made me realize, delexicalised verbs are probably one of the most important collocations there are. They are used in speaking, they are used to a high degree, they have multiple meanings and should only be understood in their collocations. Also, some students make linguistic choices which allow them to avoid their use which prevents them achieving more naturally sounding speech.

Although, he may not have expressed the use of **'get'** perfectly, he was not far away from the truth. By using a logical way of looking at one of the most used words in the language. He was making a constant mental effort to use what most learners find easy to avoid and because of this I'm sure, as his teacher, my lack of awareness was more a hindrance than a help. I hope after reading this you won't make the same mistake I did and can take steps to improve your own students performance by being more aware of delexicalised verbs. In the **first part** of this article the writer explored the use of delexicalised verbs and the problems they create for our learners.

Exercise 1

1. What is a verb drill?

2. What is delexicalised verb drill?

Chapter 4

New words in English

New words enter the English language all the time - the exact number is uncertain but there are thousands appearing every year. If we know this, then we can find ways of giving our learners strategies to help them cope with language that is new to them.

- The ability to grow
- Borrowing
- Affixation
- Coinage
- Onomatopoeia and reduplicatives
- Acronyms
- Clipping
- Blending
- Conclusion

The ability to grow

There are various factors behind the ability of English to grow at such a significant rate:

- Words, however they are created, can become part of the language very easily. They only need to be used by enough speakers. This may be an unfamiliar concept for some learners, as other languages have systems which are more controlled.
- Native speakers enjoy playing with the language and actively invent new vocabulary.
- English is a common language in many specialized areas such as science, technology and the Internet, and as these areas grow so does the vocabulary needed to express new ideas and objects.

- English has many points of contact with other languages. Here words can cross over.
- There are many ways in which new words come into existence.

Below are some of the ways in which new words come into being.

Borrowing

Many words in English seem to have a Latin quality to them - this is because some of them have developed from French vocabulary learnt during the Norman occupancy many years ago. However, words have been borrowed from many languages, not just French - some of them are now extinct or almost never used. Learners can be asked to match words that are familiar to them with languages - and suggest what their origins might be.

- Examples (from unusual languages):
 - capsized (Catalan)
 - apartheid (Afrikaans)
 - billiards (Breton)
 - saga (Icelandic)
 - funky (Congo)
 - panda (Nepali)

Affixation

The use of prefixes and suffixes is one of the most common ways in which new words are created, so common in fact that a speaker will be unsure if a word exists or they have just created it. A key skill for learners developing their vocabulary is knowing how prefixes and suffixes change meaning and form.

- Example (with the root use):
 - misuse
 - disuse
 - unused
 - unusable

- useless
- useful
- abuse etc.

Coinage

This is the creation of entirely new words - quite unusual given the competition from all the other, perhaps easier ways of creating words. These can be based on similar sounding words - '**Hobbit**' was based on rabbit - or change from a brand or product to common usage - **Kleenex** and **Hoover**. They can also of course have no roots in anything, such as the scientific terms '**googol**' and '**quark**', or slang terms such as to '**chug**' a drink.

Onomatopoeia and reduplicatives

Words can be invented to describe sounds and the things that make sounds, such as '**cuckoo**', '**splash**', '**plop**' and '**whoop**'. They can also be invented by duplicating a sound, e.g. '**honky-tonk**', '**wishy-washy**', '**mish-mash**' and '**ping-pong**'. More recent new words of this kind include '**analysis paralysis**' and '**chick-flick**'.

These words can be fun to learn and motivating, as sound often guides learners to meaning.

Acronyms

Phrases that are reduced to acronyms often enough become words in their own right and the original phrase is often forgotten. Some are still written as acronyms such as AIDS and VDU, but others are not, radar, yuppie and scuba, for example. Some acronyms become familiar very quickly, such as SARS and WMDs.

Clipping

This is the shortening of a longer word, often reducing it to one syllable. Examination becomes exam, laboratory lab. Many examples are very informal or slang, like '**bro**' from brother, '**dis**' from disrespect and '**maxing**', from maximizing.

Blending

This is another interesting area to explore with learners. Blends are words created by combining elements from two words - normally beginning and end - and so combining their meaning to create a new one.

➤ Examples:

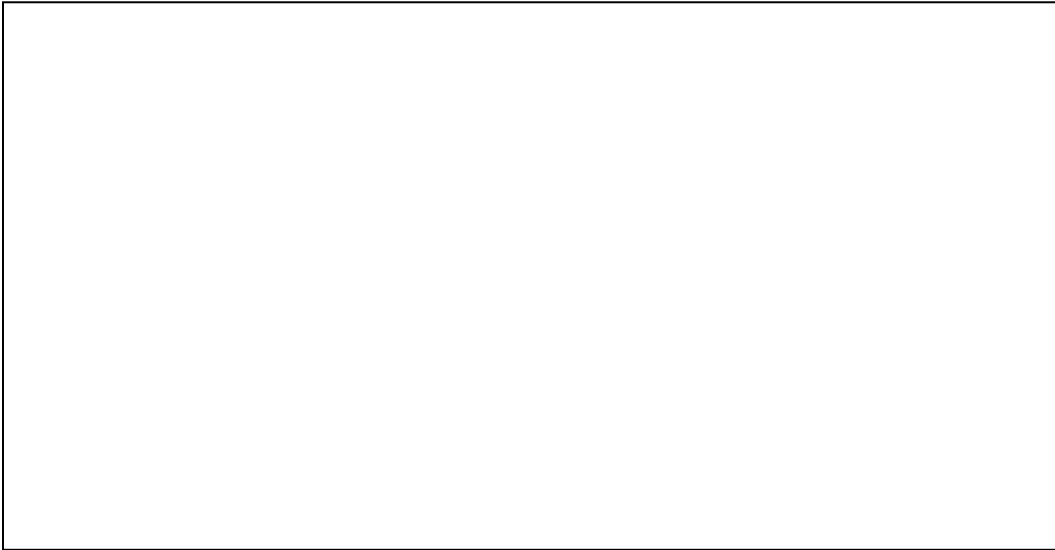
- electrocute (electrify and execute)
- smog (smoke and fog)
- transistor (transfer and resistor)
- brunch (breakfast and lunch)

There are also newer words such as '**televangelist**', '**rockumentary**' and '**dancercise**' which are more or less clear from the structure. Others are not so clear, for example '**Cubonics**' (the combining of Cuban Spanish and English) and '**acrobranching**' (a new sport involving acrobatics in trees).

Exercise 1

1. What are the various factors behind the ability of English to grow at such a significant rate?

2. What do you understand by the term “Borrowing”? How is it related to lexis?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their answer to the question above.