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## HELPING LEARNERS UNDERSTAND AND USE EXPRESSIONS WITH “GET”

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**Abstract.** Considering a great number of expressions with “get”, teachers do not have to avoid them while teaching English Language. In teaching process, however the mere attention of expressions with “get” is enough to incite confusion among the students. While teaching students, they do not always understand different patterns and meanings of the verb “get” and therefore they are not accessible to them. The scope of the article is to investigate expressions with verb “get” (*get* combined with different parts of speech, collocations, phrasal verbs, etc.) in order to help teachers better clarify the problematic topic, identify such expressions, understand, learn and use them more effectively in teaching process.

**Key-words:** *phrase, verb “get”, grammar pattern, idiom, transitive, intransitive.*

**Rezumat.** Având în vedere prezența unui număr impunător de expresii cu verbul „get” în limba engleză, profesorii nu trebuie să le evite în procesul de predare a limbii. În actul predării, însă, simpla atenție a expresiilor cu verbul „get” este suficientă pentru a induce confuzie în rândul studenților. Modelele și semnificațiile verbului „get” nu întotdeauna sunt înțelese și, prin urmare, studenții le însușesc cu dificultate. Scopul articolului este de a investiga expresiile cu verbul „get” (a fi combinat cu diferite părți de vorbire, expresii verbale) pentru a ajuta profesorii să clarifice mai bine subiectul problematic, să identifice astfel de expresii, să le înțeleagă și să le utilizeze mai eficient în procesul de predare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *frază, verbul “get”, model gramatical, idiom, tranzitiv, intransitiv*

### 1. Introduction

Expression is defined as “a phrase or a group of words that has a fixed meaning” [1], [2]. Expressions with the verb *get* are in fact multi-word verbs which are described by Gairns & Redman [3] as “verbs consisting of two, or sometimes three parts”. Thornbury considers [4] “two words are collocates if they occur together with more than chance frequency.... when we see one, we can make a fairly bet that the other is in the neighbourhood”. We agree with Lewis that teachers need to make students aware “that learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations” [5].

The reason we have chosen to focus on expressions with verb *get* is to help students improve their knowledge of vocabulary. If they enrich their vocabulary, they will be able to produce complex sentences. In addition, we believe that it would be really helpful for them to use

these expressions, since there are some learners who have already used them in class in their oral speech production.

## 2. Analysis

Lewis mentions that “language materials tend to classify the dominant patterns under the traditional labels; grammar, function, and the non-literal meaning categories of idiom and phrasal verb” [6].

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners [7] and S. Thornbury [8], were consulted for the meanings and forms of the verb *get*:

If we analyze the verb *get*, we will identify it has:

I. lexical meaning/verb

- it means *to receive/obtain/become*:

**Grammar pattern:**

get + noun

e.g. *We got a call from our friends this evening.*

*What did you get for your birthday?*

*He got a pilot last year.*

- II. de-lexicalised meaning/verb (when *get* is a multi-word verb). Having this feature, the meaning of *get* ranges from literal to idiomatic.

**Grammar patterns:**

1. get +adj.

- to talk about things changing, becoming different

e.g. *It is getting dark.*

*They got angry with him.*

2. get+ adverbial

- to talk about arriving at places

e.g. *What time did you get to university?*

*What time did you get home?*

3. get +noun+noun

- to talk about giving things to people, or fetching things for people

e.g. *We got our son a bike for his birthday.*

*Could you get me a tea?*

4. get +past participle (collocation)

- to talk about things that happened to you, caused by someone else

e.g. *They got robbed yesterday.*

*We'll get married next year.*

5. get + noun+ past participle

- to talk about causing things to change, improve, become completed

e.g. *They got their kitchen painted.*

*I'll get the car fixed.*

6. get (+noun)+-ing

- to talk about causing things to work, or move

e.g. *It took us a lot to get the car going*

*He'd better get moving.*

7. get +to-infinitive (collocation)

- to talk about managing to achieve things

e.g. *Did you get to see the film?*

*He always gets to know the answers.*

8. get +noun+to-infinitive

- to talk about causing people to do things

e.g. *Will you get your son to clean his car?*

*I can get my friend to help me.*

9. phrasal verbs:

a. phrasal verbs: get + preposition +smth/sb (e.g. *get over*)

- to get better after an illness, or feel better after something or someone has made you unhappy

e.g. *It took him years to get over the shock of his wife dying.*

*She was just getting over the flu when I saw her.*

b. phrasal verbs: get + adverb (e.g. *get away*)

- to leave or escape from a person or place, often when it is difficult to do this.

e.g. *We walked to the next beach to get away from the crowds.*

*I'll get away from work as soon as I can*

c. phrasal verbs: get + adverb+ preposition (e.g. *get out of*)

- to avoid doing smth that you do not want to do, especially by giving an excuse

e.g. *I reckon her backache was just a way of getting out of the housework*

10. idioms:

a. *get away with murder* (informal)

- to be allowed to do things that other people would be punished or criticized for

e.g. *He's so charming that he really does get away with murder.*

b. *get it together* (informal)

- to make a decision or take positive action in your life

e.g. *Tom has really got it together since I last saw him- he has started a new job and lost weight.*

### 3. Pronunciation

It is very important for students to pronounce correctly expressions with *get*. They do not have particular features of phonology, but it is essential for them to be able to stress, chunk and use such structures in utterances so they sound natural [9]. They have individual pronunciation and stress and are characterized by features of connected speech: weak forms, linking, intrusion, elision, stress, intonation.

### 4. Syntactic features

#### 1. Transitive

- to obtain, receive, be given something

e.g. *My father got a new job.*

*Did you get your test?*

- to do something, or have it done for you  
*e.g. You need to get your hair cut.*  
*They will get their car repaired.*
- cause someone or something to be in a particular state  
*e.g. I'll get my child dressed.*
- to send something to a person or a place  
*e.g. They must get this parcel across the river within 2 hours.*
- to travel a particular distance  
*e.g. She got halfway along the street and then turned left.*
- to fit or put something in a place  
*e.g. She can get many things into her satchel.*
- to understand someone or something (informal)  
*e.g. We laughed, but he didn't seem to get the joke.*
- to kill someone  
*e.g. It was the disease that got them in the end.*
- to answer the door or telephone  
*e.g. It's OK, I'll get it.*
- to use a particular vehicle to travel somewhere  
*e.g. It's not difficult if you get the tube.*
- to be able to receive particular broadcasts on your television or radio  
*e.g. Do you get cable here?*
- to prepare a meal  
*e.g. It's high time to start getting breakfast*
- to annoy someone  
*e.g. He really gets her when she doesn't prepare the homework.*

**2. Intransitive**

- to arrive at a place  
*e.g. What time did you get home last night?*
- to move to or from a position or place  
*e.g. A car stopped and we got out.*
- to come to be in a position or place  
*e.g. How did this note get in my pocket?*
- to progress to a particular point when you are doing something  
*e.g. She got to page 20 of this book, then she understood it wasn't interesting.*
- to start doing something, making progress, or going somewhere (informal)  
*e.g. Enough chatting, let's get to work.*
- To have the opportunity/be able to do something  
*e.g. Did you get to see the Louvre in Paris?*

## 5. Learner Problems and Teaching Ideas

English Language has a great number of expressions with the verb *get*, so avoiding them while teaching is not a good solution as they are widely used in daily life. As Lewis [6] highlights, teachers have to make learners conscious “that learning vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations”. And this is the case with the verb *get* as it is combined with nouns, verbs, past participles, prepositions, adverbs in order to generate different meanings. And all these possible combinations need to be learnt by the students [10]. In our teaching experience, we have noticed students do not always understand the meanings of structures with *get* and their grammar patterns. This happens because they are multi-word combinations. As it is pointed out by Gairns & Redman [3] the meaning of a multi-word unit is not always deduced from the understanding of the parts. Students sometimes struggle with the right meaning of a certain expression.

All students are really motivated to learn in greater depth English language which will facilitate a lot the learning process. In order to design a reading activity based on expressions with the verb “get”, we have selected the article “Love and death in the sea” from *Life*, intermediate level [11]. The main aim of the lesson: by the end of this lesson, students will be better able to use expressions with *get* to talk about their life experiences and give more specific details about them. For this purpose, there have been designed guided – discovery, controlled practice and freer practice tasks. We have decided to use the context of swimming since the majority of the learners like unforgettable experiences and travelling and they would find the topic of swimming and the communicative activity at the end of the lesson a fun and useful task.

The lesson starts with a lead-in stage that sets and generates interest in the context of the lesson, activates schemata and ensures students understand the context before focusing on target language. The target language is presented through the use of a reading task [12], which will present the real- life situations in which the target language can be used. The aim of the reading for gist task is to make students understand the most important information about the article. Guided-discovery task familiarizes students with the meaning and form of the target language (expressions with the verb “get”). It is essential for the students to learn both meaning and form as they will know the right use and grammar structure of the vocabulary items according to Lewis’s ideas [6] that “language materials tend to classify the dominant patterns under the traditional labels; grammar, function and the non-literal meaning categories”. We agree with Hunt that it is important for the students to be able to stress, chunk and use expressions with the verb *get* so they sound natural. They have individual pronunciation and word stress as well as have features of connected speech. Teachers need to pay attention to all the features of connected speech [13] while teaching students. Controlled-practice task aims to give students opportunity to use the target language in a controlled way and also checks students understanding of the target language, it will build up their confidence since this task of graded difficulty progresses the learning process smoothly and doesn’t jump in the free activity on the spot.

The freer practice speaking task gives learners a chance to use target language in a communicative way, promote their interactional skills, enhance fluency comparing their performance with that of their classmates, allow them to check what they have acquired, check pronunciation. Reactive language stage focuses on improving students’ oral accuracy, getting feedback on the language produced during the freer practice.

The freer practice activity aims not only to check their understanding but also produce their own sentences in the target language in a form of a story in class which will be an effective way to improve learners speaking skills.

There have been identified some problems related to expressions that contain verb “get” and solutions to them have been proposed to address the problematic areas.

To better understand the problematic aspects of the expressions with the verb “get” and possible solutions to be used in the lesson, the analysis of target language is the recommended tool to be done by the teacher [14].

### **Analysis of target language**

The focus is on the meaning, form, and pronunciation of expressions with *get*.

1. I *got into* the water.

**Meaning:** get into = enter (Macmillan Dictionary)

Checking questions:

CCQ 1 : Am I in the water now? (yes)

CCQ 2 : Have I been for a long time? (no, just entered)

CCQ3: What did I do? (I entered the water)

**Form:** get into – phrasal verb, transitive (verb+ preposition); got into – Past Simple Tense, past participle of the verb *get*

**Pronunciation:** / get 'intu:/ Phonological features: catenation, the stress falls on preposition.

2. The storm *got worse* and I decided to call it a day.

**Meaning:** get worse = become more unpleasant or bad than something else or than before, not to improve

(Macmillan Dictionary)

Checking questions:

CCQ 1: Is it good or bad now (bad)

CCQ 2: Was it unpleasant and bad before? (no)

**Form:** get worse – verb + adjective (comparative degree)

**Pronunciation:** / get wɜ:s / Features of connected speech: assimilation. The stress falls on the adjective.

3. Then I realized I couldn't *get to the beach*.

**Meaning:** *get to the beach*. = reach the beach (Macmillan Dictionary)

Checking questions:

CCQ 1: Was I able to reach the beach? (no)

CCQ 2: Did I attempt to reach the beach? (yes)

**Form:** get to (the beach) – phrasal verb, transitive, informal (verb +adverbial + noun)

**Pronunciation:** / get tu: ðə bi:tʃ / Features of connected speech: elision, weak form of *to*, *the*, stress falls on noun *beach*.

4. I wasn't *getting any closer*.

**Meaning:** get closer – move towards (Macmillan Dictionary)

Checking questions:

CCQ 1: Was I moving towards to the beach? (yes)

CCQ 2: Did I attempt to move towards? (yes)

**Form:** get closer – verb + adjective (comparative degree). *Getting closer*= present participle – component part of Past Continuous.

**Pronunciation:** / get 'kleuse / Features of connected speech : elision. The stress falls on the adjective.

5. We **get** so much from the sea.

**Meaning:** get – receive (Macmillan Dictionary)

Checking questions:

CCQ 1: Do we receive much from the sea? (yes).

CCQ 2: Do we have anything from sea now) (yes, we receive much).

**Form:** get – verb (lexical meaning).

**Pronunciation:** / get/ Features of connected speech (pronounced in the sentence above): elision.

6. I'd **got out**, but I had lost my mask, snorkel and one fin.

**Meaning:** get out – leave, go away (Macmillan Dictionary).

Checking questions:

CCQ 1: What did I want to do? (leave).

CCQ 2: Did I want to go away ? (yes).

**Form:** get out – phrasal verb (verb + adverbial) past participle (got out), component part of Past Perfect.

**Pronunciation:** /get aʊt / Features of connected speech: catenation. The stress falls on adverb.

Problem 1 Students sometimes find difficult to understand the right meaning and form of the expressions with *get*. This happens as learners may focus on the meaning and form of individual words and do not to pay attention to the lexical items that occur around them. They may not realize that the meaning and form is expressed by the whole expression [9]. Students sometimes are confused to understand the following sentences as did not know the right meanings of *get a bike* and *get dark*:

e.g. *We are going to **get** our son **a bike** for his birthday as he wants one.  
It **gets dark** at 9.00 every day.*

Teaching idea: An immediate solution will be a gap-fill exercise that will help students understand the right meaning and form of the expressions used. A solution is a gap-fill exercise that helps students understand the meaning of the expressions and then they write down the expressions in order to learn them [15], [16].

**Look at the sentences and use the right expression in the right form to complete the gaps:**

*get better, get complaints, get a job*

1. *Your English \_\_\_\_\_ these days.*
2. *The company \_\_\_\_\_ last month.*
3. *My brother \_\_\_\_\_ two days ago.*

**Complete the right forms of expressions with *get*, use the following parts of speech: verb, adjective, noun.**

**get better** ( \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ )

**get complaints** ( \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ )

**get a job** ( \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ )

Evaluation: Gap-fill exercises help learners familiarize and understand better the appropriate meaning and form of target language and learn it. In my teaching practice, learners enjoy completing gap-fill tasks. It is one of the solutions to quickly identify the right meaning and form and it promotes autonomy while learning, it is a long-term strategy as raises students' awareness of the right meaning and form of the target language.

Problem 2. Another issue in the classroom is misunderstanding of phrasal verbs with *get*. The reason for misunderstanding might be idiomatic meaning. Gairns & Redman [3] consider that phrasal verbs "consist of two, or sometimes three parts" and usually the meaning of the phrasal verbs can not be deduced from the translation of every compound bit and students struggle with their right meaning. Their meaning needs to be deduced from the whole unit. Another reason for the confusion is polysemy, students do not always know all the meanings of phrasal verbs. Students struggle with the right meaning and form of phrasal verbs. Some students have found difficult to understand the examples: e.g. *The cat **got away** from us when we were walking in the park. Fortunately, we found it later.*

Teaching idea: A solution will be a guided discovery task that will aid students to deduce the right meaning and form of the phrasal verb from the context. Usually, the design of a guided discovery, a multiple-choice task, helps students find out both the right meaning and form of the phrasal verbs.

#### **Guided discovery task:**

e.g. *Sometimes our cat **gets away** from us when we walk in the park. Fortunately, it comes home later.*

look at the phrasal verb in bold and choose:

- the right meaning:

a. *escape*      b. *come*      c. *jump*

(the right answer- *escape*)

- complete the right form

\_\_\_\_\_ +away (adverb)

(the right answer – *get* (verb))

Evaluation: Guided discovery tasks successfully help learners identify and understand better the correct meaning and form of target language and learn it. Guided discovery is one of the tasks that students enjoy doing. It also promotes their autonomy while learning, it is a long-term strategy as raises students' awareness of the right meaning and form of the target language.

#### Problem 3. Quantity/arbitrariness

There are a lot of possible expressions with "get" and it could be difficult for students to choose the right one. Hunt [9] considers that "adult learners already use collocations in their L1 and they may have difficulty with so many different collocations as they know that each collocation corresponds to different meanings". We agree with them that the interference of L1 can cause difficulty choosing the right expression with *get* in English. Students often ask: "Why is it *get a coffee* and not *bring a coffee*?" And the teacher needs to explain that the verb *get* can be combined with some nouns (in this case *coffee*) and it means *bring*.



Teaching idea 1: It is important to use techniques that will help students remember and revise the expressions with *get*, paying attention to their right meaning and form. We agree with Trownbridge [10] that the teacher could suggest organizing a lexical notebook.

Evaluation 1: Lexical notebooks will help learners remember expressions they have learnt before and will improve their communicative skills as they recall more expressions while speaking. On the other hand, this will increase their motivation to learn more expressions and boost their independence as a lot of work can be done by students. This requires good organisational skills which can be quite difficult for young learners [17], but the teacher can help them deal with the problem.

Teaching idea 2: We agree with Lewis [6] that another solution may be to train students to use dictionaries in order to understand entries.

Evaluation 2: Dictionaries develop independent learning and students can look up the words by themselves. While teaching we have noticed students enjoy looking up words as this promotes independence and helps them cope with words meaning and form while learning.

### **Pronunciation**

As students are taught to stress content words, they might put the stress on the verb *get* in phrasal verbs that have an adverbial particle, e.g. *I can't seem to **get down** to a lot of work*. Students may also struggle with features of connected speech.

Teaching idea: We agree with Harmer that “stress is vitally important in conveying meaning in phrases and sentences” [18]. **Choral drilling and individual repetition** are essential in order to deal with the problems of word stress, sentence stress, connected speech and right intonation. Teacher writes on the board sentences that contain phrasal verbs and highlights the stress pattern, or even can ask students to stress the right lexical items in their handouts. It is important for the students to know the right pronunciation with the features of connected speech, intonation and stress. To deal with these problems the teacher models the necessary pattern orally and students repeat both chorally and individually.  
e.g. /əɪ kɑːnt siːm tuː ɡet daʊn tuː ə lɒt ɒv wɜːk/

Evaluation: While modelling, teacher provides a pattern and students will pay attention to the right pronunciation. Choral drilling and individual repetition are effective ways to teach students the right pronunciation of lexical items paying attention to all the features of connected speech.

### **6. Conclusions**

While learning vocabulary, students are exposed to a lot of new lexical items with *get*. Expressions with *get* also refer to the restrictions on how lexical items can be combined together, for example, which nouns, verbs, adverbials, prepositions and past participles are used with the verb *get* in order to express a certain meaning. The verb *get* can be a component unit of some idioms that is a sequence of words which operates as a single semantic unit, like many multi-word verbs the meaning as a whole can not be deduced from an understanding of the parts. Expressions with the verb *get* have both literal and non-literal meaning.

De-lexicalised verb *get* can be the reason for misunderstanding while teaching expressions/collocations/phrasal verbs. The verb *get* has both a literal meaning (get =

receive/obtain/become) and non-literal meaning, being used in combinations with adjectives, nouns or other words, the meaning of the whole lexical unit changes.

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