

# Croatian Learners of English as a Second Language and English Phrasal Verbs

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2015

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:186:259732>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-05-13**



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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

**Croatian Learners of  
English as a Second Language and English Phrasal Verbs**

MASTER'S THESIS

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Rijeka, 2015

## **Abstract**

This thesis deals with the general belief shared by all students that phrasal verbs are hard to learn, because of various reasons: there are so many of them, they make no sense, their meanings are never straightforward, etc.

In this thesis the focus is on the definitions of phrasal verbs, numerous studies on the most adequate and easiest way to master phrasal verbs, the frequency of occurrence of phrasal verbs and finally, on an original research conducted for the purposes of this thesis.

The main hypothesis is that the learners of English understand phrasal verbs better when they occur within context than outside of it regardless of their proficiency level, because many authors propose that kind of learning as highly efficient. However, the findings of the research conducted for the purposes of this study do not support this hypothesis. The results indicate that phrasal verbs are slightly better understood when they occur within context, but the difference in the percentage is so small that it can easily be neglected.

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# **1 Introduction**

Phrasal verbs are a part of a large group of verbs which is continuously growing and they are assumed to be problematic for a large number of learners of English.

The first chapter of this thesis „Phrasal verbs in general“ deals with various definitions and classifications of phrasal verbs.

The following chapters „Phrasal verbs in speech and writing“, „Avoidance of phrasal verbs“ and „Frequency of phrasal verbs“ provide information on which speaking and writing styles use phrasal verbs more often and when it is appropriate to use them, why people tend to avoid phrasal verbs, in which situations and what drives the avoidance. This chapter also includes information on how often phrasal verbs occur in language, as well as on which phrasal verbs are the most frequent ones.

Chapters titled „Communicative competence and phrasal verbs“ and „Teaching phrasal verbs“ provide an analysis of various approaches to teaching phrasal verbs and the influence of communicative competence on the acquisition of phrasal verbs.

The last part of this thesis, titled „The present study“, deals with the research I conducted in order to find out whether learners of English understand phrasal verbs better when they occur in a sentence or stand on their own.

## 2 Phrasal verbs in general

There are numerous definitions of phrasal verbs, so we will give an overview of them here and compare them to see how they differ. In general, dictionary definitions are sufficient in order to understand where to start when learning phrasal verbs.

The Cambridge dictionary states that a phrasal verb is a phrase that consists of a verb with a preposition or adverb, or both, the meaning of which is different from the meaning of its separate parts.<sup>1</sup>

The Students' Companion book by Webster's Reference Library defines a phrasal verb as usually a simple verb that combines with a preposition or adverb, or both, to convey a meaning which is greater than the sum of its parts. (2006, p.27)

Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary defines phrasal verbs (or multi-word verbs) as verbs which consist of two, or sometimes of three, words. The first word is a verb and it is followed by an adverb (*turn down*) or a preposition (*eat into*) or both (*put up with*). These adverbs or prepositions are sometimes called particles. This dictionary also divides phrasal verbs into transitive (which take an object), intransitive (which have no object) and the ones which can be used both ways. Transitive phrasal verbs can be separable and inseparable by an object. (1995, p.310-311)

This kind of definition is similar to the one given by Richard Acklam (1992), who says that there are four different types of phrasal verbs:

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/phrasal-verb>> Webpage. (accessed 11 June 2015)

1. Verb + adverb with no object (intransitive) – this type of phrasal verb cannot be separated: e.g. break down = stop working → The car *broke down* and we had to walk.

This type of phrasal verb cannot form passive.

2. Object transitive, separable – the verb and adverb can be separated: e.g. put off = postpone → We must *put off* the meeting. OR We must *put* the meeting *off*.
3. Object transitive, inseparable – the preposition cannot be separated from the verb: e.g. take after = be similar to → He *takes after* his mother. NOT \*He *takes* his mother *after*.
4. Object transitive with two particles – phrasal verbs which have two particles, which cannot be separated from the verb: e.g. put up with = tolerate → I can't *put up with* it anymore.

According to Walkowa, phrasal verbs are also not created equally. There are two types of constructions<sup>2</sup>:

1. Prepositional verbs – these verbs are actually not phrasal verbs, but they are more common, occurring 4800 times per million words in conversation and 4200 times per million words in academic writing.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from

<[https://www.academia.edu/3989553/Helping\\_students\\_figure\\_out\\_the\\_meanings\\_of\\_phrasal\\_verbs](https://www.academia.edu/3989553/Helping_students_figure_out_the_meanings_of_phrasal_verbs)>  
Webpage. (accessed 23 May 2015)



2. Phrasal verbs – this group encompasses literal, aspectual and idiomatic phrasal verbs. The literal ones are composed of a verb and particle, which can occur in every position and they are easy to learn. Aspectual phrasal verbs have a particle which can be left out and can be problematic to learners. Idiomatic phrasal verbs have a meaning which cannot be deduced from the individual meanings of the verb and the particle, and they are very problematic for learners of English. Phrasal verbs occur 1800 times per million words in conversation and 800 times per million words in academic writing.<sup>3</sup>

Darwin and Gray (1999, p.68) agree that the definition in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik from 1985 is a standard. Phrasal verb is defined in two parts: syntactic and lexical. The syntactic part defines the phrasal verb as a verb followed by a morphologically invariable particle, which functions with the verb as a single grammatical unit, whereas the lexical definition is that a phrasal verb functions as a single lexical unit.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from <<http://www.macmillandictionaries.com/MED-Magazine/October2005/34-Feature-PV-Spoken-Written.htm>> Webpage. (accessed May 25 2015)

### **3 Phrasal verbs in speech and writing**

English has three main vocabulary styles: formal, informal and popular, which uses slang. There is often overlapping between them, but they operate under different conditions and achieve different ends.<sup>4</sup>

#### **3.1 Formal English**

Formal English is usually used in writing for academic purposes; textbooks, essays, business letters, contracts. In speaking, it is only used on official or serious occasions.<sup>5</sup> Formal English uses more complex vocabulary and sentences tend to be longer and more complicated. It uses multi-syllable words and one-part verbs instead of phrasal verbs.

#### **3.2 Informal English**

Informal English is everyday language. It uses many short words, colloquial vocabulary and multi-part verbs. Informal English is not without grammar rules, but they are not followed as strictly as in formal English.<sup>6</sup>

#### **3.3 Popular English**

Popular English is used mostly for interaction with friends and chatting online. It uses phrasal verbs, idioms and slang frequently. A major problem with popular English is that its vocabulary is either too limited or too specialised and it changes rapidly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from <<http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/SentLevsUsage.html>> Webpage. (accessed 30 May 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Taken from <[https://www.academia.edu/8186664/Identifying\\_formal\\_and\\_informal\\_vocabulary](https://www.academia.edu/8186664/Identifying_formal_and_informal_vocabulary)> Webpage. (accessed 15 June 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Taken from <<http://www.antimoon.com/how/formal-informal-english.htm>> Webpage. (accessed 15 June 2015)

<sup>7</sup> Taken from <<https://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/SentLevsUsage.html>> Webpage. (accessed 18 September 2015)

As already mentioned, phrasal verbs are very common in spoken English. It is not wrong to use them in formal language, but it is preferable to use a one-word equivalent if there is one. There are many different situations in which a phrasal verb is more appropriate and natural in formal English than a single-word verb.

## 4 Avoidance of phrasal verbs

People can often avoid phrasal verbs while speaking by replacing them by other words, but while reading and listening phrasal verbs cannot be avoided because they are frequently used. Therefore, it is very important to understand at least the most common ones. (Acklam, 1992) Phrasal verbs seem to be more common in informal spoken discourse than in formal written discourse, and certain phrasal verbs are associated with a particular field in which there are no alternatives. (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.254)

Several studies on the avoidance of phrasal verbs have been conducted. Hulstijn and Marchena's study from 1989 focused on Dutch learners of English. Their hypothesis was that Dutch learners would avoid phrasal verbs, not for structural reasons, but for the semantic ones. They concluded that Dutch learners avoided phrasal verbs because of the similarities between L1 and L2 – their strategy was to play it safe and use one-word verbs which have general meaning. (Liao & Fukuya, 2002, p.74-76)

Typical difficulties for learners of L2, such as comprehension (deriving the meaning of a phrasal verb from the individual items that they consist of) and being misled by meanings (many phrasal verbs have two or more meanings) encourage the avoidance of phrasal verbs. Usually learners, whose L1 is Latin-based, use words which resemble words in their own language in place of phrasal verbs.<sup>8</sup> The traditional cross-linguistic view holds that avoidance arises in those areas that are different in the new language and therefore difficult to learn. (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, p.37)

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from <<http://cdigital.uv.mx/bitstream/123456789/34200/1/dauzonarias.pdf>> Webpage. (accessed 30 May 2015)

Laufer and Eliasson conducted a study on two groups of students, Swedish and Hebrew, in order to find the cause of avoidance of phrasal verbs in second language learning; the difference between the first and the second language, similarity between the two languages, or second language complexity. Swedish-speaking and Hebrew-speaking students had the same level of proficiency in English. They were given two types of tests: a multiple-choice test and a translation test. Laufer and Eliasson found that phrasal verbs are avoided by learners whose native language lacks such a grammatical category (Hebrew) but are not avoided by those who have the category in their native language. (Swedish)

These findings support the idea that avoidance stems from differences between the first and the second language. Furthermore, the test has shown that if the structure is complex, but familiar to the learner from his or her native language, it will not be avoided. The best predictor of avoidance is L1 and L2 difference, i.e. cross-linguistic and not intralinguistic difference. (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, p.40-45)

## 5 Frequency of phrasal verbs

When it comes to the frequency and occurrence of phrasal verbs in English, there is a study conducted by Gardner and Davies in 2007, which showed that only 25 phrasal verbs account for nearly one third of all phrasal verb occurrences in the British National Corpus and 100 phrasal verbs account for more than one half of all such items. These top 100 phrasal verbs have 559 different meanings. (Gardner & Davies, 2007, p.339) Researchers have analysed the British National Corpus with the help of a computer program. First they established the list of the most frequent adverbial particles which form phrasal verbs, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Adverbial Particles (AVPs) in British National Corpus

Frequency of Adverbial Particles (AVPs) in BNC			
Form	Total tags	# as AVP	% as AVP
out	149,727	145,706	97.3
up	180,792	158,064	87.4
down	91,832	72,709	79.2
back	97,154	75,233	77.4
off	67,479	37,751	55.9
round	30,821	10,895	35.3
along	18,555	4,925	26.5
over	128,304	32,526	25.4
around	43,391	10,384	23.9
on	705,790	54,956	7.8
through	81,184	5,797	7.1
about	190,615	12,587	6.6
in	1,845,077	34,411	1.9
under	60,049	313	0.5
by	504,969	371	0.1
across	24,053	13	0.1
Total	4,219,792	656,641	15.6*

*Note.* # = token frequency. \* = Average of column.

*Note.* Taken from „Pointing Out Frequent Phrasal Verbs: A Corpus-Based Analysis“ by D. Gardner and M. Davies, 2007, *Tesol Quarterly*, 41(2), p. 346

From these results it is clear that certain forms that act more usually as particles than as prepositions, e.g. *out* (97,3%), *up* (87,4%), *down* (79,2%) and *back* (77,4%) occur much more often as adverbial particles in phrasal verb constructions (*She picked out a birthday card.*) than they do as prepositions in prepositional phrases (*She ran out the door.*) (Gardner & Davies, 2007, p. 347) The most difficult particles seem to be *on* and *in*, which function both as particles and prepositions in numerous cases and therefore learners need to master methods for recognition of phrasal verbs besides particle identification.

The next step was to find a list of most frequent lexical verbs which can be found in phrasal verb constructions. The results have revealed that 20 verbs are found in 54% of all phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus, which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Top 20 Lexical Verb (LV) Lemmas Functioning in Phrasal Verb (PV) Forms

LV lemma	# in BNC PVs	% of all BNC PVs	Cum % of all BNC PVs	Total # in BNC	BNC rank	% as PVs
GO	48,016	9.3	9.3	227,103	2	21.1
COME	36,878	7.1	16.4	145,047	9	25.4
TAKE	22,970	4.4	20.8	173,996	7	13.2
GET	20,223	3.9	24.7	213,726	3	9.5
SET	18,569	3.6	28.3	39,149	40	47.4
CARRY	15,617	3.0	31.3	30,572	53	51.1
TURN	13,040	2.5	33.8	44,051	32	29.6
BRING	12,514	2.4	36.2	42,567	33	29.4
LOOK	12,226	2.4	38.6	109,110	11	11.2
PUT	11,970	2.3	40.9	67,839	16	17.6
PICK	9,997	1.9	42.8	14,274	138	70.0
MAKE	7,368	1.4	44.2	210,880	4	3.5
POINT	7,159	1.4	45.6	13,767	149	52.0
SIT	7,112	1.4	47.0	27,388	64	26.0
FIND	6,934	1.3	48.3	96,010	13	7.2
GIVE	6,174	1.2	49.5	125,312	10	4.9
WORK	5,985	1.2	50.6	63,104	19	9.5
BREAK	5,428	1.0	51.7	18,642	109	29.1
HOLD	5,403	1.0	52.7	46,773	30	11.6
MOVE	5,197	1.0	53.7	37,820	41	13.7
Total	278,780	53.7	53.7	1,747,130	39*	24.2*

Note. # = token frequency. Cum % = cumulative frequency percentage. Values based on non-separable and separable counts (i.e., verb [V] + adverbial phrase [AVP], V + X + AVP, V + X + X + AVP). Total phrasal verb (PV) tokens in the British National Corpus (BNC) = 518,923; total lexical verb (LV) tokens in BNC = 10,404,107. \* = Average of column.

Note. Taken from „Pointing Out Frequent Phrasal Verbs: A Corpus-Based Analysis“ by D. Gardner and M. Davies, 2007, *Tesol Quarterly*, 41(2), p. 349

Gardner and Davies simply put together the previous two tables of the most frequent adverbial particles and lexical verbs which occurred in the British National Corpus and the results show that one of top 100 phrasal verbs will occur in every 400 words of English. Table 3 shows the full list of top 100 phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus, as well as the total number of senses they have.

Table 3. Number of WordNet Senses for Top 100 Phrasal Verbs (PVs) in BNC

Number of WordNet Senses for Top 100 Phrasal Verbs (PVs) in BNC							
PV	Senses	PV	Senses	PV	Senses	PV	Senses
Go on	5	carry on	4	put on	9	move in	3
Carry out	2	go up	7	bring out	9	look around	1
Set up	15	get out	7	move on	1	take down	4
Pick up	16	take out	14	turn back	4	put off	5
Go back	4	come down	5	put back	2	come about	1
Come back	5	put down	7	go round**	5	go along	3
Go out	6	put up	8	break up	19	look round***	0
Point out	3	turn up	5	come along	2	set about	3
Find out	4	get on	7	sit up	2	turn off	3
Come up	12	bring up	8	turn round**	3	give in	2
Make up	8	bring in	5	get in	5	move out	2
Take over	8	look back	2	come round**	1	come through	4
Come out	11	look down*	5	make out	10	move back	1
Come on	5	bring back	2	get off	11	break off	5
Come in	5	break down	8	turn down	5	get through	5
Go down	8	take off	9	bring down	6	give out	4
Work out	8	go off	6	come over	1	come off	3
Set out	3	bring about	5	break out	5	take in	17
Take up	13	go in	1	go over	4	give back	1
Get back	4	set off	7	turn over	9	set down	6
Sit down	3	put out	10	go through	5	move up	2
Turn out	12	look out	2	hold on	5	turn around†	0
Take on	5	take back	6	pick out	2		
Give up	12	hold up	7	sit back	2		
Get up	8	get down	7	hold back	5		
Look up	1	hold out	5	put in	7		

*Note.* Total senses = 559. PV = phrasal verb. \*Consulted *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (Courtney, 1993). \*\*WordNet = *around*. \*\*\*See *look around*. †See *turn round*.

*Note.* Taken from „Pointing Out Frequent Phrasal Verbs: A Corpus-Based Analysis“ by D. Gardner and M. Davies, 2007, *Tesol Quarterly*, 41(2), p. 352

Gardner and Davies suggest that learners should memorize the top 20 lexical verbs functioning in phrasal verbs (Table 2) as well as the most frequent particles functioning in



phrasal verb forms to successfully acquire more than 50% of all phrasal verbs in English. (Gardner & Davies, 2007, p.349-354)

There is another study conducted by Chamielec and Weiss (2009), whose goal was to make a list of the most frequent phrasal verbs using Web search engines. This study had one flaw at its onset – it used already finished lists of frequent phrasal verbs from various studies and books. Other problems include the fact that not every word pattern corresponds to an actual phrasal verb, e.g. *(to) be in* can appear as *I'm in*, which is a false result. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate the meanings of a single phrasal verb, e.g. *throw up (vomit)* and *throw up (an idea)*. The assumption of Chamielec and Weiss is that the number of false matches can be neglected when it is compared to the number of true matches. They collected search results from 5 different search engines: Google, Yahoo, AllTheWeb, Gigablast and Microsoft Live. The results revealed that out of ten most frequent phrasal verbs on the internet, only five of them can be found on the list of 100 most frequent phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus from the previous study by Gardner and Davies. These include: *go back*, *find out*, *set up*, *come on* and *work out*. The remaining phrasal verbs which occur are: *sign up*, *look for*, *be in*, *work on* and *start off*.<sup>9</sup>

Liu Dilin was interested in the difference in the frequency of phrasal verbs in British English and American English. In his study from 2011, he included three different corpora: COCA (large free online corpus of American English, which consisted of 390 million words at the time the study was conducted), LSWE (Longman Spoken and Written English which consists of 40 million words) and BNC (British National Corpus which consists of

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<sup>9</sup> Taken from <<http://www.cs.put.poznan.pl/dweiss/site/publications/download/2008-weiss-chamielec.pdf>> Webpage. (accessed 30 May 2015)

100 million words). The last two were used indirectly, while COCA was the main corpus used in the study.

First of all, Liu considered the lists of phrasal verbs which were made by Biber and Gardner and Davies. Gardner and Davies made a list of 100 most frequent phrasal verbs, which was mentioned earlier, while Biber made a list of 31 most frequent phrasal verbs. Only four of Biber's phrasal verbs were not included in Gardner and Davies' list. Liu added 48 more phrasal verbs that he identified as very frequent and ended up with 152 phrasal verbs which are most frequently used: 100 from Gardner and Davies, 4 from Biber and 48 that Liu himself identified.

He came to the conclusion that about 20 phrasal verbs are significantly more used in American English: *check out, come out, come up, figure out, get out, go ahead, grow up, hang out, hold up, lay out, pick up, pull out, show up, shut down, take off, end up, turn out, take on, turn around* and *wake up*. Ten phrasal verbs are used more in British English: *build up, carry on, fill in, get on, set out, set up, sort out, take over, take up* and *turn up*. (Liu, 2011, p.664-672)

Some of the most frequent phrasal verbs in British English and American English and their ranking within the corpus can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency and Distribution of the Most Frequent Phrasal Verbs in the COCA and the BNC Listed According to Their Overall Rank in COCA

PVs	In COCA		In BNC		Rank- order difference
	Total	Rank order	Total	Rank order	
<i>go on</i> <sup>2</sup>	153.48	1	148.33	1	0
<i>pick up</i> <sup>2</sup>	115.40	2	89.95	3	1
<i>come back</i> <sup>2</sup>	109.44	3	79.91	5	2
<i>come up</i> <sup>2</sup>	101.48	4	54.97	9	5
<i>go back</i> <sup>2</sup>	97.31	5	80.27	4	1
<i>find out</i> <sup>2</sup>	80.43	6	65.88	8	2
<i>come out</i> <sup>2</sup>	72.51	7	49.99	12	5
<i>go out</i> <sup>2</sup>	70.77	8	76.52	6	2
<i>point out</i> <sup>1</sup>	69.71	9	69.51	7	2
<i>grow up</i> <sup>1**</sup>	69.56	10	18.44	53	43
<i>set up</i> <sup>1</sup>	65.11	11	103.12	2	9
<i>turn out</i> <sup>1</sup>	64.58	12	42.64	21	9
<i>get out</i> <sup>2</sup>	64.43	13	35.28	30	17
<i>come in</i> <sup>2</sup>	63.36	14	47.91	14	0
<i>take on</i> <sup>1</sup>	62.17	15	41.79	22	7
<i>give up</i> <sup>1</sup>	56.11	16	41.66	23	7
<i>make up</i> <sup>1</sup>	55.80	17	54.43	10	7
<i>end up</i> <sup>1**</sup>	54.80	18	33.62	32	14
<i>get back</i> <sup>2</sup>	53.56	19	45.31	19	0
<i>look up</i> <sup>3</sup>	50.24	20	38.53	26	6
<i>figure out</i> <sup>1**</sup>	48.17	21	2.73	147	126
<i>sit down</i> <sup>2</sup>	47.43	22	44.57	20	2
<i>get up</i> <sup>2</sup>	47.41	23	39.18	25	2
<i>take out</i> <sup>3</sup>	44.32	24	34.10	31	7
<i>come on</i> <sup>3</sup>	43.22	25	48.07	13	12
<i>go down</i> <sup>2</sup>	39.62	26	47.59	15	11
<i>show up</i> <sup>1**</sup>	39.57	27	7.64	119	92
<i>take off</i> <sup>2</sup>	36.58	28	21.52	46	18

Note. Taken from „The Most Frequently Used English Phrasal Verbs in American and British English: A Multicorpus Examination“ by D. Liu, 2011, *Tesol Quarterly*, 45(4), p.683

One of the conclusions that Liu also came to in his study is that, although there are differences between British and American English usage and frequency of phrasal verbs, the most common phrasal verbs are generally similar between the two varieties. (Liu, 2011, p.679)

## 6 Communicative competence and phrasal verbs

Communicative competence comprises 4 areas: linguistic (use of grammar, syntax and vocabulary), sociolinguistic (how to use language appropriately, concerning the topic, setting and the relationship between people communicating), discourse (interpretation of larger context) and strategic competence (how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns).<sup>10</sup> In other words, communicative competence refers to the knowledge of syntax, phonology, morphology and the ability to use language appropriately in different social settings and for different purposes. Many linguists have dealt with communicative competence throughout the history.

Noam Chomsky differentiates between competence (knowledge of language) and performance (use of language). Dell Hymes (1972) brought the sociolinguistic aspect to Chomsky's view and defined communicative competence as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations. Widdowson (1983) differentiated between competence and capacity – the ability to use knowledge as means of creating meaning in language. He believed that ability is not a component of competence. Canale and Swain (1980) see communicative competence as synthesis of knowledge and skill needed for communication, or as the way in which an individual can use knowledge in actual communication. Sauvignon (1972) defined communicative competence as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting. All of this shows that linguists have reached an agreement that a competent language user should possess both the knowledge about language and the ability and skill to activate that knowledge in a communicative event. (Bagarić & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007, p.95-100)

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<sup>10</sup> Taken from <<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/goalsmethods/goal.htm>> Webpage. (accessed 14 June 2015)

Through the communicative approach, learners are exposed to phrasal verbs at an early stage in their learning. It is believed that there are 3 main reasons why students have problems learning phrasal verbs: there are over 4000 phrasal verbs (and this number is still growing), phrasal verb meanings are different from the meanings of individual words of which they are composed, and the grammar of phrasal verbs is unpredictable (separation of the verb and particle). (Kagan, 2010, p.13)

Bearing all this in mind, a teacher should, when teaching phrasal verbs, be a facilitator of student's learning and not the instructor. He should also follow the features of the communicative approach, such as: give more importance to the written and spoken activities, teaching should be student-centred, teaching activities should be generally based on dialogues and group activities, and the aim is to teach materials which are used in daily life. (Kagan, 2010, p.16)

The same author conducted a study in 2010 which included 54 subjects. All of them were freshman students of the same socio-economic background, between the ages of 18 and 20, who were given a pre-test to determine their knowledge and afterwards were divided into 2 different groups, which had no meaningful difference in knowledge. Each group went through a four-week teaching period. One group was taught phrasal verbs using the traditional methods such as filling in the blanks and explaining the meaning of phrasal verbs, while the other group was taught using the communicative approach, such as discussing the phrasal verbs before explaining the meanings of words. All of the participants were given a post-test after the teaching period. The results of this study show that the communicative approach was highly successful. The group which was taught with

the help of the communicative approach showed a better performance. (Kagan, 2010, p.16-20)

The theoretical background of communicative language teaching consists of different models, e.g. that of Canale and Swain from 1980, that of Bachman and Palmer from 1990 and that of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell from 1995. The last group believes that in communicative language teaching, to make it more effective, detailed linguistic specifications should be included. (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1995, p.16-21)

Their model includes:

1. Linguistic competence or grammatical competence – this includes knowledge of phonology (vowels, consonants, intonation, rhythm, etc.), lexicology (content and function words), morphology (parts of speech and grammatical inflections) and syntax (phrase structure, word order, sentence types, etc.)
2. Discourse competence – it refers to the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words and structures to achieve a unified spoken message. Cohesion (bottom-up elements that help generate text; it accounts for how conventions of substitution and ellipsis allow the avoidance of repetition), deixis (interpretation of deictic personal pronouns, spatial references, temporal references, etc.), coherence (expressing purpose/intent through appropriate content schemata, managing old and new information, maintaining temporal continuity) and generic structure (formal schemata

which allows the user to identify an oral discourse segment as a conversation, interview, report, lecture, etc.) contribute to this competence. (Celce-Murcia, 1995, p.47)

3. Actional competence – it represents the ability to perform speech acts and language functions, to recognize and interpret utterances as speech acts and language functions, and to react to such utterances appropriately.
4. Sociolinguistic competence – it refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express the message appropriately. This includes the knowledge of language variation with reference to sociocultural norms of the target language.
5. Strategic competence – strategies for language learning can be learning strategies (cognitive – use of logic and analysis, metacognitive – planning of learning, memory-related – use of acronyms, images sounds, etc.) and communication strategies (achievement, self-monitoring, interacting)

This model is more detailed than Canale and Swain's and it differs from Bachman and Palmer's because it places lexical knowledge within linguistic knowledge. (Celce-Murcia et.al., 1995, p.16)

In 1995 Celce-Murcia revised this model and added a couple of new features to it, so the latest model of communicative competence consists of formulaic and interactional competence, beside the ones listed above:

6. Formulaic competence – refers to fixed chunks of language which speakers use in everyday communication, such as routines (fixed phrases such as *of*

*course* and formulaic chunks such as *How do you do?*), collocations, idioms and lexical frames (e.g. *I'm looking for \_\_\_\_\_*. *See you later.*)

7. Interactional competence – it represents communicational competence, e.g. how to open and close conversations, how to establish and change topics, how to interrupt, etc.

Celce-Murcia (1995, p.51) holds the view that her revised model suggests a number of principles for design and implementation of language courses. She believes that language instruction must be integrated with cultural and cross-cultural instruction. This includes basic knowledge of history and geography, gender roles, family relations, political and educational system and important customs in the target language. Real interaction cannot be practiced in a teacher-fronted language classroom. Celce-Murcia believes that all learning objectives should be presented within a context meaningful to learners. Learning tasks should be interactive whenever possible, e.g. pair work, group work, role play, etc.



## 7 Teaching phrasal verbs

There are various reasons why phrasal verbs represent a problem for students. One of them is that there is a large number of phrasal verbs and another one is that the combinations of verbs and particles seem completely random. Richard Side (1990, p.144-145) listed the reasons why students do not like phrasal verbs. First of all, there is a confusing number of combinations of a verb and a particle (e.g. make up, take up, make out, take out, etc.) and many phrasal verbs have more than one meaning. Side points out that the approach „memorize the list of phrasal verbs“ is problematic because some phrasal verbs with objects look identical to verbs followed by a prepositional phrase:

e.g. They *ran over* the bridge. (= crossed the bridge by running – verb + preposition)

They *ran over* the cat. (= knocked down and passed over – phrasal verb)

Some phrasal verbs included in such lists have a one-word definition, which is usually more natural for students to use, especially if this word is more related to a word in students' own language. (e.g. *pick up* = receive) The ability to use phrasal verbs is influenced by the students' L1. This kind of interference is conceptual, because concepts like *up* and *down* can vary from culture to culture. (Side, 1999, p.145)

Side proposes we should try grouping phrasal verbs together in the process of learning and making lists of these grouped phrasal verbs. In his opinion students should also have a section for each particle in their notebooks, in which they should add new examples when they occur during the course.

Celce-Murcia (2001) proposed several techniques to help students understand every grammatical structure, including phrasal verbs:

1. Highlighting – particular grammatical structure (phrasal verbs) should be highlighted in the text so that students pay closer attention to them.
2. Garden path strategy – giving students information about phrasal verbs, but not all of them. The main idea is to give students only partial explanations so they draw their own conclusions, which should enhance their understanding and knowledge of phrasal verbs.
3. Input processing – not learning the rules by heart, but learning these rules during activities where phrasal verbs are used.

Further suggestions for learning phrasal verbs successfully include grouping according to topic. (e.g. health: *drop off*, *ease off*, *pass away*, etc.) One possible way to teach phrasal verbs is by using their synonyms, e.g. *bring out* = to publish, *fall for* = fall in love with. There are also tasks which develop grammar and sociolinguistic competences, such as multiple choice tests. Paraphrasing can be effective for developing strategic competence, e.g. a teacher divides students into two groups, a student from one group says a sentence: „*The judge gave a thief a warning and allowed him to go unpunished.*“ A student from another group transforms this sentence using the appropriate phrasal verb: „*The judge gave a thief a warning and let him off.*“<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Taken from <<http://www.tstu.ru/en/science/st/pdf/2011/pozdnyakova1.pdf>> Webpage. (accessed 10 June 2015)

To develop thinking, language competence, contextual, semantic and linguistic prediction, a cloze test can also be helpful. Phrasal verbs should be taught in communicative situations, e.g. students can simulate conversations between a husband and a wife, a doctor and a patient, etc. Students can also answer different questions using phrasal verbs, e.g. „*There is a plan to build a new supermarket where the old cinema now stands. What will happen to the cinema before the supermarket can be built?*“ – „*It will be pulled down.*“ Writing informal letters and essays, as well as making up a story based on pictures with the obligatory use of phrasal verbs can be highly beneficial.<sup>12</sup>

All of these techniques include students' participation. The most important thing is to put the students in real-life situations. This way it is possible to teach phrasal verbs in a positive atmosphere, students will be willing to participate and the process of learning will also be positive.

There is a study conducted by Darwin and Gray which criticises the approaches to identifying phrasal verbs. Their main concern is that English is a highly productive language which creates problems (syntactic and semantic) for ESL learners. Furthermore, native speakers of English have an unconscious understanding of the meaning and use of particles, which also allows them to create new phrasal verbs. (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p.66)

According to them, the process of acquiring phrasal verbs has three main flaws (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p.67):

1. Definition – phrasal verb is usually defined as a verb + particle combination acting as a single verb, but Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) pointed out that

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<sup>12</sup> Taken from <<http://www.tstu.ru/en/science/st/pdf/2011/pozdnyakova1.pdf>> Webpage. (accessed 10 June 2015)

this is not always true, e.g. if we think of a phrasal verb *drink up* it can be an example of both a phrasal verb and a free combination.

2. Frequency of particular phrasal verbs – many researchers often work with what they believe to be the most common phrasal verbs, but they might be wrong. Various research papers have been published and in most of them there are only 4 to 5 matches to the most frequent phrasal verbs.
3. Presentation of phrasal verbs – grouping phrasal verbs according to the verb is a popular method, but it does not really promote the use of phrasal verbs.

In order to define what a phrasal verb is and what it is not, various researchers tried to develop a series of tests which should help students acquire phrasal verbs. There are two different views; the traditional view by Bolinger, developed in 1971 and an alternative approach by Darwin and Gray, developed in 1999.

### **7.1 The traditional view**

The traditional view presented by Bolinger in 1971 is that a verb + particle combination is indeed a phrasal verb, so he proposed nine different tests to prove this. According to Bolinger, these tests should be useful for both students and teachers when trying to identify phrasal verbs. (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p.71-75)

1. Replacement – this is the most common test to determine whether a verb + particle combination is a phrasal verb. If a single-word verb can replace a phrasal verb, then we speak of a phrasal verb. The main flaw of the replacement test is that many phrasal verbs do not have a single-word equivalent, while another one is that it accepts as phrasal verbs combinations which are not phrasal verbs. (e.g. *refer to* = mention)

2. Formation of passives – it is generally believed that transitive phrasal verbs occur in the passive voice, but that is not always true; e.g. I *came across* my old Barbie in the basement. → \*My old Barbie *was come across* in the basement.
3. Formation of action nominals – Lees (1963) stands behind the idea that action nominals can be derived from transitive phrasal verbs (e.g. He *brought up* the facts. → his bringing up of the facts), but some phrasal verbs do not form acceptable action nominals (e.g. I *came across* an old photograph → the coming across of an old photograph)
4. Object moving – this test states that a particle can be placed either before or after the direct object of transitive phrasal verbs according to Bolinger (1971), e.g.:  
 He *looked up* his friends. → He *looked* his friends *up*.  
 The main flaw of this test is that some transitive verbs are inseparable, e.g.:  
 They *came across* the problem. → \*They *came* a problem *across*.  
 In some cases, object moving can change meaning, e.g.:  
 I don't want to *take on* Jill. (hire) → I don't want to *take* Jill *on*. (challenge)
5. Pronoun placement – direct-object pronouns are placed before the particle in transitive phrasal verbs, but some inseparable transitive phrasal verbs are exceptions to the rule, e.g.: Let's *take* them *on* in a game of chess. → Let's *take on* them in a game of chess.
6. Adverbial insertion – this test shows that phrasal verbs often do not allow the insertion of adverbs between the verb and the particle, e.g. \*He *turned* quickly *out* the light.

7. Stress – phrasal verbs often follow established patterns of stress and the stress usually falls on the particle, e.g.:

He figured it OUT.

He figured OUT the problem.

The main problem with this kind of test is that it is also valid for free combinations, which means that free combinations have stress similar to that of phrasal verbs.

8. Definite noun phrases – Bolinger used this test to see whether a verb-adverb combination was close enough to be considered a phrasal verb. In other words, he wanted to check the degree to which a verb and an adverbial particle have achieved the status of a unit. (Hampe, 2002, p. 29)

e.g. They *pushed in* the door. *not* → \*They *pushed inward* the door.

The flaw of this test is that it does not distinguish between particles and prepositions, e.g. *Look up* the word! → *Focus on* the word. (not a phrasal verb)

9. Listing – Bolinger's idea is to list all of the phrasal verbs, but he is also aware of two problems with this idea. The first one is that the list would be out of date even before it was finished and the second one concerns regional differences. (e.g. Great Britain and USA use different phrasal verbs)

## 7.2 An alternative view

Darwin & Gray (1999, p.79-81) have proposed an alternative approach which proposes that all verb+particle combinations should be considered phrasal verbs until proven otherwise. They have developed a list of 6 tests which constitute their approach:

1. Particle repetition – it is not acceptable to repeat a particle without its verb:

e.g. \*I *looked up* your name, *up* his name and *up* her name.

Prepositions and adverbs can be repeated without the verb: e.g. I *looked up* one isle, then *up* the next.

2. Where questions – a particle is not a part of a phrasal verb if it retains its non-phrasal-verb meaning while answering a where-question:

e.g. He *ran up* the valley.

Where?

*Up* the valley.

In this example *up* retains its non-phrasal-verb meaning.

I *looked up* the address.

Where did you look?

\**Up* the address.

In this example *up* does not retain its non-phrasal-verb meaning. Therefore, *look up* is a phrasal verb.

3. Fronting – a particle in a phrasal verb follows the verb proper and inverting this order produces unacceptable sentences:

e.g. He *made up* a story.

\**Up* he *made* a story.

\**Up* a story he *made*.

4. Adverb insertion – Darwin & Gray suggest that only adverbs ending in *-ly* + combination of 2 adverbs should be used so that Bolinger's test from 1971 makes sense. E.g. They crept *slowly* and *silently* down the hall.

If two *-ly* adverbs are inserted between the verb and the particle of a potential phrasal verb and if the sentence is acceptable, the combination is not a phrasal verb.

5. Stress – Bolinger's stress test concluded that the final phrase syllable of a phrasal verb combination requires some kind of stress. This means that the particle will also have some degree of stress. Darwin & Gray concluded that any verb + particle combination, whose particle can be left out, cannot be a phrasal verb:

e.g. She *ran up* a huge bill.

She *ran to* the part.

6. Intonation units – the main idea behind this test is that a pause cannot be inserted between the verb and a particle and that comprehension is intact:  
e.g. I *passed/out* in the doctor's office.



## **8 The present study**

### **8.1 Aims and hypotheses**

The aim of this study is to examine the understanding of phrasal verbs containing the verb *take* within and outside the given context among groups with different levels of knowledge of English.

The main hypothesis of this research is that learners of English understand phrasal verbs better when they occur within the context than outside of it, regardless of the proficiency level.

The second hypothesis is that the difference in the percentage of understanding of phrasal verbs outside and inside the context, will be the highest in learners of lower proficiency level in English. In other words; context will help them understand phrasal verbs better.

### **8.2 Subjects**

The subjects of this research were originally 93 people, ranging in age from 20 to 31, 64 women and 29 men. Gender, age, social background and background education did not play a significant role in this research. Most of the subjects were students and all of them were current employees of the Croatian Telecom, a telecommunications service provider in Croatia. These 93 participants were pre-tested with the help of an online English placement test to determine their language proficiency level.

After the test, 66 of them were chosen to participate further in this research so that the groups would be of an equal size. All of the participants in this study were volunteers,

even though they were partially compensated. The second part of this research took place during their working hours in the customer service with the permission of the Head of the Sector, for which they were normally paid.

### **8.3 Materials**

The material used for this research was a questionnaire, which consisted of 3 parts. A sample of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendices. The first part consisted of 3 short questions to determine the gender, age and previous experience in learning English. The second part consisted of 8 phrasal verbs with the verb *take*, and the subjects were supposed to translate them into Croatian. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of 17 sentences written in English, which included phrasal verbs from the second part of the questionnaire. The subjects were asked to translate the sentences into Croatian.

### **8.4 Procedures**

93 people from the original pool of participants were asked to take an online English placement test. They were given the link for the test via e-mail. The test took them about 30 minutes to complete and they were not monitored during the testing. After the subjects completed the test, the results were sent back to the researcher also via e-mail.

66 subjects were asked to participate in the next phase of the research, which took place at the premises of the Croatian Telecom in Rijeka. Even though the participants were divided into groups, depending on their proficiency level, they were not aware of this fact. This part of the research was carried out during 12 different sessions over a period of a month and a half.

Each session started with short instructions, which stressed that the questionnaire was anonymous. The subjects were given the first and the second part of the questionnaire (Appendices A and B) and asked to fill in the gaps with the Croatian translations of the given verbs. They were asked not to leave blank spaces and to write anything they assumed might be the answer, even if they were not completely sure of the meaning.

There was no time limit, but the approximate time of solving this part was 10 minutes, after which the questionnaires were taken away from the participants and they were given the third part (Appendix C), which also had no time limit. The subjects were asked to translate the given sentences into Croatian and not to leave blanks. The approximate time of solving this part was 35 minutes.

## **8.5 Results**

### **8.5.1 A2 proficiency level**

The group of participants with A2 proficiency level consisted of 22 people, 16 women and 6 men, with the average age of 24.6. The subjects reported having an average of 10.7 years of experience in learning English.

#### **8.5.1.1 Results of Part 2 of the questionnaire**

The results of the second part of the questionnaire are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %	<i>N</i>
take aback	22.70%	5
take in	54.50%	12
take off	59.09%	13
take over	59.09%	13
take on	40.90%	11
take up	27.20%	6
take after	0%	0
take back	40.90%	11

*N* = number of participants who answered correctly

The results in the Table 5 indicate that the number of correct answers is higher when it comes to phrasal verbs with more possible translations. In 18.02% of all possible answers, there was a blank space left, which was treated as a wrong answer.

The most interesting fact that can be observed from Table 5 is that no one provided a correct translation for the phrasal verb *take after* and in most cases it was translated as *brinuti se*. (72.7%)

Out of 172 phrasal verbs which were supposed to be translated, 71 of them were translated correctly, that is, 41.7% of translations were correct.

#### 8.5.1.2 Results of Part 3 of questionnaire

Due to the fact that this group of participants showed a basic knowledge of English and that the translations of the sentences they provided were poor, in this part of the questionnaire we did not take into consideration how well a sentence was translated as a whole, because some of them did not make any sense. Instead, we concentrated only on the translations of phrasal verbs within the sentence.

Table 6 shows the results for correctly translated phrasal verbs within the sentence.

Table 6

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %			N		
	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3
take aback	18.18%	13.63%	/	4	3	/
take in	22.72%	9.09%	/	5	2	/
take off	54.54%	4.54%	45.45%	13	1	10
take over	22.72%	68.18%	/	5	15	/
take on	54.54%	18.18%	/	13	4	/
take up	72.72%	50%	/	16	11	/
take after	4.54%	0%	/	1	0	/
take back	36.36%	77.27%	/	8	17	/

N= number of participants who answered correctly

The number of correct answers in this part of the questionnaire varied a lot from one phrasal verb to another. The percentage of correct translations of phrasal verbs with numerous meanings is high for *take off*, but rather low for *take in*. It is an interesting fact that identical phrasal verbs scored differently in different sentences. It seems that the sentence structure does not have anything to do with it. A more logical explanation would be that the sentences which occur more often in everyday life, or are mentioned in the media, have a higher score than other sentences.

Out of 374 sentences, 127 were correctly translated, which is a total of 35.95% of correctly translated sentences within this group. The hypothesis that the learners of English understand phrasal verbs better when they occur within the context of a sentence than outside of it was therefore not confirmed.

### 8.5.2 B2 proficiency level

The group of participants with B2 proficiency level consisted of 22 people, 17 women and 5 men, with an average age of 25.1. They reported having an average of 15.8 years of experience in learning English.

#### 8.5.2.1 Results of Part 2 of the questionnaire

The results for the second part of the questionnaire are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %	N
take aback	68.18%	15
take in	90.90%	20
take off	100%	22
take over	81.81%	18
take on	68.18%	15
take up	54.54%	12
take after	9.09%	2
take back	90.90%	20

N = number of participants who answered correctly

These results show that the percentage of correct answers was much higher for phrasal verbs with more possible translations, but within this group the overall result is also much higher than within the previous group.

In the case of 9.88% of all possible answers, there was a blank space left, which was treated as a wrong answer. The most surprising result was that only two people, or 9.09%, translated the phrasal verb *take after* correctly and in most cases, or 90.90%, it was translated as *brinuti se*. No one left a blank space as a translation for this verb.

Out of 172 phrasal verbs which were supposed to be translated, 124 of them were translated correctly, which is a total of 72.09% of correct translations.

#### 8.5.2.2 Results of Part 3 of the questionnaire

Within this group the sentence translations were quite good. Many participants had problems with word order, but the translations they provided made sense in most cases. The criterion for a sentence to be evaluated as correct was that a sentence had to be translated as a whole, and not just part of it, even though the translations were not seen as wrong if the greater part of the sentence was translated correctly and if the sense was intact.

Table 8 shows the results for correctly translated phrasal verbs and sentences.

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %			N		
	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3
take aback	81.81%	63.63%	/	18	14	/
take in	77.27%	63.63%	/	17	14	/
take off	90.90%	59.09%	95.45%	20	13	21
take over	86.36%	86.36%	/	19	19	/
take on	81.81%	63.63%	/	18	14	/
take up	86.36%	77.27%	/	19	17	/
take after	31.81%	18.18%	/	7	4	/
take back	86.36%	95.45%	/	19	21	/

N= number of participants who answered correctly

Out of 374 sentences, 274 were correctly translated, which is a total of 73.26% of correctly translated sentences within this group. Even though most of the phrasal verbs were more correctly translated within the given context than outside of it, and the overall result goes in favor of the hypothesis that the learners of English understand phrasal verbs better when they occur within the context of a sentence than outside of it, the difference

between the percentage of successful translations within and outside the context is negligible.

### 8.5.3 C1 proficiency level

The subjects in this group were 14 women and 8 men, with an average age of 25.6. They reported having an average of 16.3 years of experience in learning English.

#### 8.5.3.1 Results of Part 2 of the questionnaire

Data presented in Table 9 show the number of correct translations of phrasal verbs outside the given context.

Table 9

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %	N
take aback	77.27%	17
take in	95.45%	21
take off	100%	22
take over	95.45%	21
take on	77.27%	17
take up	68.18%	15
take after	18.18%	4
take back	95.45%	21

N = number of participants who answered correctly

This group did not leave any blank spaces at all, and even though the subjects demonstrated the best knowledge of the given phrasal verbs, as was expected, my personal expectations were even higher. For example, *take after* was correctly translated by only 18.18% of subjects, which is not much better than the results of the other two groups.

Out of 172 phrasal verbs, 138 of them, or 80.23% were translated correctly.



### 8.5.3.2 Results of Part 3 of the questionnaire

As was the case with the group with B2 proficiency level, sentence translations within this group had to make sense to be accepted as correct.

Table 10 presents the data on how well this group performed when it came to phrasal verb within sentence translation.

Table 10

PHRASAL VERB	CORRECT TRANSLATION %			N		
	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3	sentence 1	sentence 2	sentence 3
take aback	86.36%	77.27%	/	19	17	/
take in	81.81%	63.63%	/	18	14	/
take off	95.45%	77.27%	100%	21	17	22
take over	86.36%	95.45%	/	19	21	/
take on	86.36%	77.27%	/	19	17	/
take up	100%	95.45%	/	22	21	/
take after	59.09%	13.63%	/	13	3	/
take back	95.45%	100%	/	21	22	/

N= number of participants who answered correctly

Out of 374 sentences, 306 were translated correctly, which is a total of 81.81% of correct translations. Again, the main hypothesis was confirmed, but the difference in the percentage of correct translations outside the context and correct translations within the context was so small, only 1.58%, that it can be neglected.

## 8.6 Discussion

The present study examined the understanding of the phrasal verbs containing *take* within and outside of the context of a sentence among Croatian learners of English of different proficiency levels.

The results of this study suggest that the understanding of a given phrasal verb is not context dependent, which is contrary to the main hypothesis. The results of the third part of the questionnaire, which deals with the translation of phrasal verbs with *take* within the context of a sentence, were almost completely the same as the results of the second part of the questionnaire, which deals with the translation of phrasal verbs with *take* outside the context of a sentence.

The subjects who are at A2 proficiency level performed better in situations where phrasal verbs were not context dependent. The subjects who are at B2 and C1 proficiency levels performed better in the part where phrasal verbs were given within the context of a sentence, but the percentage of correct answers in this part was so low, that it cannot be seen as an argument that would support the proposed hypothesis.

One possible explanation for this result could be Richard Side's proposal (1999) that making lists of phrasal verbs and grouping them together is sufficient for successful teaching of phrasal verbs. Putting phrasal verbs within a sentence to help learners extract the meaning, as Celce-Murcia (2001) proposes, did not prove to be of help when it came to the subjects included in our study.

Although it is not clear from the present study which teaching approach was used when our subjects were taught phrasal verbs, concerning their age and the time at which studies proposing new, modern, approaches such as putting verbs in sentences, highlighting important information, teaching in communicative situations, were conducted, we can assume that our subjects were taught in traditional settings with the help of traditional approaches.

It would be interesting to compare, on the basis of a similar study, the results of phrasal verbs within and outside of a sentence which would be conducted using subjects who were taught phrasal verbs with the help of traditional approaches and subjects who were taught phrasal verbs with the help of new and alternative approaches. The results of such a study might be different from the results of the present study. Kagan's study (2010), which compared the general knowledge of phrasal verbs of students who were taught using the traditional methods and of those who were taught using the communicative approach, supports this idea. The subjects in Kagan's study (2010), who were taught phrasal verbs using the communicative approach, performed better on every test. Therefore, it is conceivable that Croatian speakers of English who were taught using the communicative approach might perform better on the tests used in this study, which would then support our hypotheses.

Bearing in mind the fact that phrasal verbs are rare in Croatian, and the Laufer and Eliasson's research (1993) which showed that Hebrew students avoided phrasal verbs because their native language lacks such a grammatical category, Croatian learners of English exhibited a similar behaviour, especially learners at A2 proficiency level. In the part of the questionnaire where they were asked to directly translate phrasal verbs that were

presented without context, i.e. outside of a sentence, they occasionally left a blank space, while there were no blank spaces left in the part where phrasal verbs were supposed to be translated within the context of a sentence, although many of these translations were quite poor. Both hypotheses in the present study can be seen as confirmed from this point of view, since the context of a sentence seems to have encouraged the subjects to translate the phrasal verbs which were not translated outside the context, even though these translations were, in most cases, wrong.

Compared to the research of Gardner and Davies (2007) which provides a list of the most frequent phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus, as well as the list of the most frequent adverbial particles which form phrasal verbs, two out of eight adverbial particles, *aback* and *after*, and two out of eight phrasal verbs with *take*, *take aback* and *take after*, which were included in our study, cannot be found in these lists.

The subjects in our study performed worse translating these two phrasal verbs, as opposed to other phrasal verbs with *take* which can be found in the list. None of the phrasal verbs used in our study can be found in the list of the most frequently used phrasal verbs on search engines established by Chamielec and Weiss (2009).

This indicates that the results in our study might have been different and our hypotheses confirmed had the phrasal verbs used in this study been those that were included in the lists compiled by Gardner and Davies (2007) and Chamielec and Weiss (2009). However, this is highly speculative, because the lists of frequently occurring phrasal verbs used in our study are not the only existing lists of frequently occurring phrasal verbs, and perhaps some other lists do not take phrasal verbs with *take* as an entry

at all, just as Chamielec and Weiss' (2009) does not. Until we have a complete list of the most frequent phrasal verbs which takes into account all the possible modalities in which language is used, we cannot be sure which verbs are actually the most frequent. Therefore, it is hard to draw conclusions about the possible effects of the frequency of particular phrasal verbs on the results of this study.

### **8.6.1 Limitations**

The present study had several limitations. Ideally, the subjects at the same proficiency level would have been people of similar ages, with similar experience in learning English. They would have been more evenly distributed across gender, too, so the study would have one more dimension. It would be interesting to see whether gender is a factor in understanding phrasal verbs.

The last part of the questionnaire in this study was administered over a period of month and a half, so it was very time-consuming. This part of research lasted for a month and a half because all of the subjects in the study are employees of a company which provides flexible working hours, so it was challenging to arrange a time when members of the same proficiency level group were available to participate in the research.

One of the flaws of this study is that some of the results might have been manipulated from the start, because the subjects took the English placement test at home, while they were unmonitored.

### **8.6.2 Future research**

Future research should expand the list of phrasal verbs and compare the understanding of at least two of them, if not more. Some of these phrasal verbs could come from the list of

the most frequent phrasal verbs, such as Gardner and Davies' (2007), and other phrasal verbs which are not included in such lists, to see whether there is a connection between frequency and understanding. In other words, do learners understand the more frequently occurring phrasal verbs better than the less frequent ones?

## **9 Conclusion**

Phrasal verbs have a great significance in English because they occur in everyday language quite often, and therefore teachers place great importance on them while teaching learners of English as a second language.

In this thesis I have listed numerous reasons why phrasal verbs are so difficult to master, why people tend to avoid them, which phrasal verbs are the most frequent ones, as well as different approaches to teaching phrasal verbs, which could be helpful to learners of English.

In order to verify my personal, and the belief of some researchers that it is simpler to understand the meaning of phrasal verbs when they are put in a sentence, I conducted a research with 66 subjects, divided into 3 groups with different proficiency levels of English.

The outcome of this research was not expected, which may be due to the rather small number of subjects in each group, as well as to the fact that the subjects were unattended when taking the placement test, so the results might have been manipulated. None of the hypotheses in this research was confirmed. All 3 groups showed none or slightly better understanding of the meaning of phrasal verbs within the sentence.

This study provides evidence that phrasal verb understanding might be improved when the phrasal verbs occur within the context, but this is not likely to be true. It also indicates that the understanding is better for phrasal verbs which are believed to be more frequent, but this was not the focus of this study and remains an open question for further researches.

## 10 Appendix A

### Questionnaire

Instructions: Please put a tick ☒ in the box next to the answer which refers to you or write your answer in the space provided.

Sex:    Male ☐            Female ☐

At what age did you start learning English? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_



## 11 Appendix B

### Part 1

**Translate these phrasal verbs into Croatian:**

take aback \_\_\_\_\_

take in \_\_\_\_\_

take off \_\_\_\_\_

take over \_\_\_\_\_

take on \_\_\_\_\_

take up \_\_\_\_\_

take after \_\_\_\_\_

take back \_\_\_\_\_

## 12 Appendix C

### Part 2

**Translate these sentences into Croatian:**

1. When I logged onto my laptop this evening I was taken aback by the headlines that prices of the fuel went up.

---

2. Don't be taken in by their promises.

---

3. Mary's presentation was rather boring and I didn't take in much of what she said.

---

4. Our new business has really taken off this year and we made a huge profit.

---

5. John takes off our president really well.

---

6. The flight for London took off on time.

---

7. Linda took over as manager when her father retired.

---

8. Most of my children take after my husband.

---

9. The city was taken over by rebel troops.

---

10. My company had to take on ten new employees to handle the increasing work.

---

11. Over the years she has taken on a doleful look.

---

12. My new book collection takes up four shelves.

---

13. I take after my grandparents completely.

---

14. I had to take back everything I'd said about the project when I realized how successful it was.

---

15. Her brother works too much, but even though it takes up most of his day, he is very happy with his job.

---

16. John asked directly if they were looking for someone with his skills and they were kind of taken aback.

---

17. The scent of freshly cut grass takes me back to childhood.

---

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