Using the Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon in the classroom

You can use the Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon (OPAL) in two main ways:

1. Make words and phrases from the OPAL lists the explicit focus of study, for example by spending a whole lesson, or just ten minutes of each lesson, focusing on nothing but words and phrases from the lists.

2. Integrate the study of the OPAL words and phrases into some of the other activities you are doing with your students – whether it is reading a text, listening to a lecture and taking notes, or preparing a written assignment or oral presentation. You can add an element into each of these activities that consists of focusing on language, highlighting where OPAL words and phrases are used, and deliberately trying to incorporate them into productive tasks.

We recommend that you combine these two approaches. You could start with a lesson or half-lesson to introduce OPAL to your students, looking at one or two of the sublists, or the functions in the phrase lists. Once the purpose of OPAL is established, you may not need to devote much class time to it, but simply refer back to it when you are doing vocabulary work or analysing a text. You could set students OPAL-related work for homework, or encourage them to use it in their vocabulary notebooks.

Suggested activities

1. Single words (written or spoken).

   Look at the sublists and decide which one is at about the right level for your students, where they will know some of the words but not all of them. Divide the list into groups of ten words. Either choose one group of ten to focus on for the whole class, or give different students/pairs a different group of ten to work on. From their ten words, students need to pick three, one to match each of these statements:

   a. I know this word and am confident about using it.
   b. I kind of know this word but am not quite sure about it.
   c. I don’t know this word.

   Students then pick one of the words (probably their b. or c. word) to research and present to the class, looking at its meaning and how it is used, with some example sentences, possibly from the student’s own discipline. Encourage students to use a dictionary when researching their word, ideally a dictionary of academic English, which will offer a much better contextualization of the word, with examples based on real academic texts. The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of Academic English is recommended.

2. Phrases (written or spoken).

   Pick one of the academic functions in the phrase lists to work on with the class. Choose a reading or listening text that illustrates this function and includes some of the phrases. Get students to read/listen and identify the phrases that are used. Ask each student to write a paragraph/prepare a short presentation – possibly on a topic from their discipline – that makes use of some of the phrases.