Investigating the Challenges of Understanding and Using English Phrasal Verbs by Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract of the study

The researcher conducted this study to explore the challenges EFL(English as a foreign language) students encounter at universities when utilizing and comprehending phrasal verbs. The data were collected by using a test. The data were then analyzed using the statistical program (Excel). According to the conclusion, EFL university students have trouble using and comprehending phrasal verbs. The researcher makes some suggestions to help reduce these challenges.

Key Words: Phrasal verbs challenges, phrasal verbs, Foreign Language.

دراسة التحديات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الأجنبية في فهم واستخدام الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية

الملخص:

أجرى الباحث هذه الدراسة لاستكشاف التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات عند استخدامهم وفهمهم للأفعال المركبة. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام مزيج من اختبار واستبيان. ثم تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي. (lecxE).. ووفقا للاستنتاج النهائي، يواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات بعض الصعوبات في استخدام وفهم الأفعال المركبة، وقد قدم الباحث بعض الاقتراحات للمساعدة في تقليل هذه التحديات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صعوبات استخدام الأفعال المركبة، الأفعال المركبة؛ اللغة الأجنبية

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs have been proven essential in English and are used widely in various situations. They can be found in everyday English and used in more professional environments; knowledge of them is necessary for both oral and written language proficiency. English contains hundreds of phrasal verbs, some of which might have a literal meaning. Many phrasal verbs are easily understood literally; however, where phrasal verbs are used with their adverb, many are figurative, which makes the meaning much less transparent unless the context is obvious (McCarthy & O'Dell 2004). Also, phrasal verbs are related to their base verbs in that the adverb or particle amplifies or alters the base verb's implication.

Some examples of such particles include stand up, wake up, and save up, where the particle stresses the verb's action. However, in other cases, the phrasal verb has a very different meaning from the individual verb; for instance, the verb 'take off' means 'to remove' when used in connection with garments (e.g., 'I decided to take off my jacket because it was hot). Some phrasal verbs have many meanings. The same applies to phrasal verbs, thus making their use complex (Quirk et al., 1985). There are intransitive and transitive phrasal verbs, and the second is used with a direct object, while the former does not.

While it is accurate to note that some phrasal verbs may be formal and Versatile and can be used in both spoken and written English, they are generally informal and more common in spoken English. This often results in learners failing to appreciate that, although in spoken English, they feature as rather casual, in written English, they are used formally. Learners must be aware of how phrasal verbs can exist in two separate domains and how they transit between them so that learners of English can communicate proficiently in both informal and technical parlance (Smith 1925).

A lot of students as English Language learner gets confused when they come across phrasal verbs. They concentrate on the first part of phrasal verbs (the verb in this case) and ignore the second part, which may be a particle such as to look up, or the result is that the learner may fail to get the whole meaning. This confusion may be due to incomplete and lack of knowledge. This study aims to shed light on the most common problems EFL students may face when using phrasal verbs. "Especially students at Ajdabiya University".

1.3 Research questions

This study is based on the supposition that most Libyan students of the English Department at the University of Ajdabiya have difficulties using phrasal verbs.

The researcher attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties do EFL students encounter at Ajdabiya University when using phrasal verbs?

2. What are the possible solutions and recommendations to overcome these difficulties?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Phrasal Verbs

If a verb is joined with another "morphologically invariable" particle, it becomes a phrasal verb that may work lexically or syntactically as a single grammatical word. Quirk et al. (1985) note that: "The meaning of the combination clearly cannot be inferred from the meaning of the constituent elements, the verb and the particle in this case" (pp. 1150–1152). In the same vein, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1990) defined phrasal verbs as structures that consist of a verb in combination with one or two items: verb + adverb, verb + particle, or verb + adverb + particle.

According to Wyatt (2006), a phrasal verb is a verb that is used with a preposition, adverb, or both. These are not the same as prepositional verbs, simply a verb followed by a preposition such as used in (Eastwood, 1994). For example: 'I was looking at the picture.' Combined, there is typically a substantial variation between the accurate depiction of a semantically incorporated particle and its base verb.

For example, the different form of one word, such as "give up," has a meaning that will be considerably different from the official "give" on its own (Gaims & Redman, 2011).

When a phrasal verb does not need an object in the sentence, this is referred to as an intransitive phrasal verb. Some of these verbs can be used independently of an object to complete any sentence. Transitive phrasal verbs, again, take an object to complete the sense or meaning of the whole verb phrase. A transitive phrasal verb cannot be achieved without an object, and constructing a sentence with such a verb must involve an object. A word can be a particle in one use and a preposition in another (Alexander, 1988).

2.2 Difficulties in learning Phrasal Verbs

Implicit items in phrasal verbs are one of the sources of difficulty in studying as they are considered one of the most challenging aspects of the English language. However, one major shortcoming is that many phrasal verbs have multiple meanings (Strong & Leeming, 2024). For example, 'take off' could mean 'to remove something,' like 'take off your shoes'; 'to achieve an immediate success,' like 'the band's new single took off.' Such a distribution of word senses may cause difficulties for the learner, who cannot decide on the appropriate meaning within a given context (Aarts & Chalker, 2014).

Another difficulty is phrasal verbs, when people do not know the definition of the whole verb but combine the meaning of separate words (Cuza, 2024). For example, "blow off" means to miss an event or activity without a reasonable explanation; an example would be someone who didn't attend a meeting and nobody knows where he is. This proverb's idiomatic usage challenges learners to go beyond the meaning of each segment of the expression (McCarthy & O'Dell 2004).

2.3 Importance of phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs should be learned because they are highly used in English, and the meaning of verbs may experience a variation when applied in the formation of the phrasal verbs. For instance, the common verb grows with the sense of "to get bigger," while the phrasal verb grows up and has a somewhat different meaning: "to become an adult" or" to begin to behave more responsibly." Phrasal verbs are primarily relevant for informal English because people often use them in daily communication. It may be not easy to comprehend informal language if one does not know what some words mean. However, learners who expand their knowledge of phrasal verbs can also improve their fluency in idle conversation. Phrasal verbs are also crucial since they re-occur frequently in spoken and written casual and informal contexts. This is because learners have to master the everyday usage of particular PVs and their meaning in context appropriately. Using more literary synonyms instead may sound only ceremonious, pretentious, or even absurd to native English speakers (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2004).

2.4 Relevant Previous Studies

Yong (2015) examines how Chinese learners employ verb phrases using corpus data. Through a three-level comparison. According to the study, Chinese learners' usage is more influenced by the learning sequence and the semantic characteristics of the phrase verbs. The term verb is used less frequently in Chinese learners' vocal expressions. This finding indicates difficulty for Chinese learners as the spoken language is written. The teacher should stress the semantic equivalency between the phrase verb and the individual word during the teaching process to help the Chinese English learner use the verb more correctly. On the other hand, educators should educate students about the many circumstances in which the two categories of words are employed by using the data from the corpus of native English speakers. Additionally, students can contribute more to the actual corpus by using the teacher in the teaching corpus. After allowing the pupils to examine the differences between the two verb kinds, the teacher will summarize. This finding indicates difficulty for Chinese learners as the spo-

ken language is written. These students will have a more thorough understanding of how to use these two types of verbs, which will reduce the phenomenon's usage and abuse. This will help the teacher help the Chinese English learners appropriately utilize the phrase verb.

According to Liao and Fukuya (2004), the author examined Chinese learners' avoidance of English PVs. They began by reviewing three earlier studies that assessed L1 speakers of Hebrew, Dutch, and Swedish for their ability to avoid English PVs. Students who speak Hebrew and do not have PVs in their mother tongue tend to steer clear of PVs, especially those with idiomatic meanings (Dagut and Laufer, 1985). Because PVs are available in their native tongue, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) expected Dutch learners of English to avoid them. Their findings imply that while the Dutch students did not completely shun PVs, they did tend to steer clear of idiomatic PVs that were overly Dutch. Unexpectedly, PVs with a comparable counterpart in the L1 were not chosen. Thirdly, advanced Swedish English language learners whose L1 shares the PV structure with English were the subject of Laufer and Eliasson's 1993 study. Their findings show that Swedish L1 learners did not avoid PVs or show the same idiomatic-similarity avoidance as Hulstijn and Marchena.

Wierszycka (2012) is a study at A dam Mickiewicz University in Poland. A POS-tagged spoken corpus of English language learners served as the basis for this investigation. The investigation of the compositionality of phrasal verbs revealed that learners do not seem to follow the linear nature of native PV usage. The idiomatically ambiguous phrasal verbs are the most ignored, although they underuse PVs in all 20 compositional groups. To put it further, the students tried employing one-word equivalents instead of phrasal verbs.

Kamarudin (2013) conducted a study at the University of Birmingham in March 2013. Since over half of the students in this study received scores between 50% and 79% on the PVs test, which indicates an average performance, the findings of the phrasal verbs test clearly suggest that learners under inquiry generally demonstrate a moderate degree of understanding of phrasal verbs. The results of the PV test also showed that the learner is still having trouble understanding this language form. Additionally, it was discovered that learners comprehend literal PVs more well than non-literal ones. The results of this study also show that learners tend to treat PVs as two lexical units rather than one. In other words, there is a lack of attention to high frequency and awareness of the regular. In short, the above finding provides empirical evidence to Malaysian learners'

understanding of PVs, and several valuable findings, which, to date, have not been found in any other study in Malaysia, have been highlighted to inform relevant parties for further action.

Khumbangly (2005) conducted a study in Thailand, and Thai ESL students were typically exposed to a formal, bookish learning atmosphere. Due to their more significant usage in casual spoken English, phrasal verbs are undoubtedly not frequently taught in traditional grammar classes. Thai teachers often push Thai EFL students to remember a lot of phrasal verbs without teaching them how to use them. This inhibits Thai EFL students from using phrasal verbs (Khumbangly, 2005, p.3). Nonetheless, Niran Khumbangly (2005) investigated the success of teaching phrasal verbs through the meanings of adverb particles: an example of "off," "out," and "up." Compared to the conventional method of teaching and learning phrasal verbs, the results showed that this instruction makes it easier for Thai EFL learners to acquire them. Unfortunately, few teachers will likely use this technique in the classroom and continue to teach Thai EFL students phrasal verbs using a conventional method.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

A structured test that appraised knowledge and utilization of phrasal verbs was developed and administered to the participants. Ensuing the purposes of this research study, the test included 20 questions focused on four primary types of phrasal verbs: prepositional verbs, intransitive verbs, transitive verbs, and separable versus inseparable phrasal verbs. Every item focused on testing students' ability to use appropriately and do recognition of phrasal verbs within various contexts, including but not limited to completing sentences and identifying errors in sentences. Within the study context, the test went beyond the rote recall of information to require some level of understanding of phrasal verbs' role in phrases and sentences. Therefore, such a test was not merely evaluative but also formative and diagnostic, revealing areas of difficulties alongside gaps in understanding. The questions used were realistic questions within the scope of language and commensurate with the level of final-year English majors. Such questions enabled the researchers to determine how students could apply their theoretical knowledge of phrasal verbs—a concept learned in advanced English classes. Conducting the test in a fully-equipped classroom gave the participants additional comfort and guaranteed consistency during data collection

while avoiding unnecessary distractions. It can be concluded that in their entirety, the test served as a practical tool for assessing students' understanding of phrasal verbs and identifying areas needing specific instructional adjustment.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study consisted of 60 final semester undergraduate students from the English department at the Faculty of Arts, Ajdabiya University. These students were chosen with purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method common in qualitative and educational research. In this case, the students had finished upper-level English courses like grammar, semantics, and advanced reading and writing annexes. This academic training was adequate for them to respond appropriately to the study about understanding and the use of phrasal verbs.

Purposive sampling was applied to guarantee that the participants possessed the necessary linguistic skills and exposure to phrasal verbs, which are often met at the advanced stages of English learning. The selection also noted variation in academic achievement for balanced student representation. This provision enabled the researchers to understand better the issues relating to learners with different proficiency levels. The differences in academic accomplishment shed light on the students' under-

standing of phrasal verbs, thereby adding value to the findings by illustrating the students' learning, knowledge and use of phrasal verbs. In conclusion, the sampling method was necessary to collect detailed concentrated data that facilitated useful extrapolations concerning the learning and teaching of phrasal verbs in advanced EFL settings.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the test were analyzed quantitatively, with participants' responses categorized into three performance groups: Excellent, Good, and Poor. To answer the research questions, errors made in their answers were recorded and thoroughly quantified. Covariance was employed to study the variability among the three groups, with different performances marked in the level of variability as depicted by the standard deviation. This classification helped determine the participants' understanding of phrasal verbs to inform instructional strategies on the most common errors.

4 Results

4.1 Scores of phrasal verb test from the total population of subjects

Score Range	Grade	Performance Level	Number of Students
9–0	D and C	Poor	31
14–10	B	Good/Passed	26
20–15	A	Very Good/Excellent	3

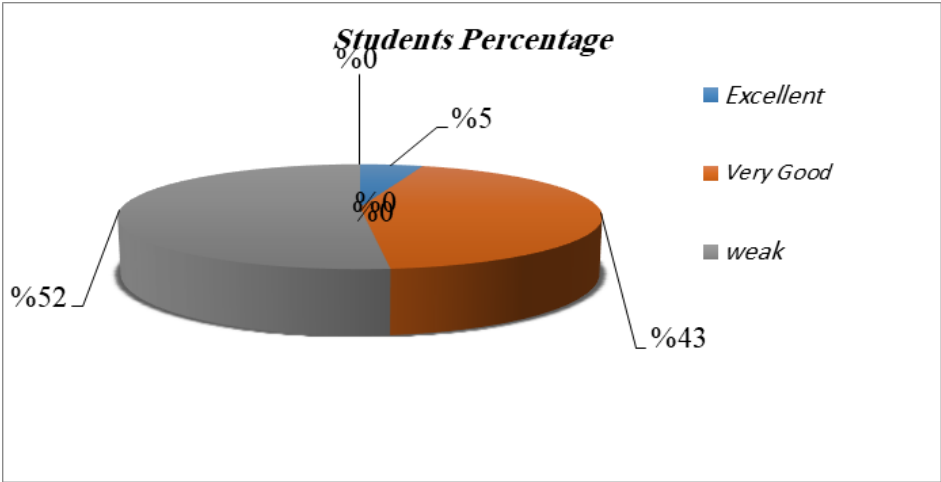*Figure 1: Scores of phrasal verb test from the total population of subjects (60 Students)*

Figure 1 shows a wide gap in achievement by the learners in the test on phrasal or phrase verbs. Most participants, 31 out of 60, gained between 0 and 9 marks related to grades "D" and "C, " meaning that the participants had poor knowledge or understanding of the phrasal verbs. The last 26 students earned marks between 10 and 14, which is "B" and denotes a satisfactory or passing competency level. Three students, marked between 15-20, exhibited good to excellent understanding of phrasal verbs as of a "grade A ."This research reveals that a significant portion of students have considerable difficulties with practising phrasal verbs, thus underlining the necessity to develop appropriate instructional activities to increase students' competence in using these phrasal verbs.

4.2 Category 1- Failed students students

The results in the table indicate that the number of wrong answers is higher when it comes to phrasal verbs.

Phrasal Verb	Number of Students with Incorrect Answers	Type of Error
Broke down	out of 31 16	Wrong Answer
Get by	13	Wrong Answer
Look down on	19	Wrong Meaning
Hand in	17	Wrong Answer
Put off	18	Wrong Meaning
Switch on	7	Wrong Answer
Run out of	16	Wrong Meaning
Get on with	15	Wrong Answer
Run into	(students selected the correct answer 31) 0	-
Showing off	20	Wrong Meaning
Come across	14	Wrong Answer
Show up	13	Wrong Answer
Took off	18	Wrong Meaning
Get into	13	Wrong Answer
Look after	14	Wrong Answer
(Broke down (second instance	9	Wrong Answer
Turn off	13	Wrong Answer
Run	20	Wrong Answer
Give in	16	Wrong Answer
Drop in	14	Wrong Meaning

According to this scientific analysis, it is noticed that students encounter some difficulties in using phrasal verbs). (52%) of the students have failed to choose the correct answers to the questions.

4.3 Category B- Good of passed students Errors

In the second category (10-14), ''B" we have {26} students, representing 80% who are considered good or passed. The phrasal verbs were chosen from the 20 phrasal verbs test items. The number of mistakes committed by each student was counted. There are some examples to explain the points as results in the table that indicate the number of wrong answers.

Phrasal Verb	Number of Students with Incorrect An

Broke Down .1	out of 26 15	Wrong Answer
Get By .2	22	Wrong Answer
Look Down On .3	15	Wrong Answer
Hand In .4	20	Wrong Answer
Put Off .5	10	Wrong Answer
Switch On .6	3	Wrong Answer
Run Out Of .7	20	Wrong Meaning
Get On With .8	13	Wrong Answer
Run Into .9	(students selected the correct answer 26) 0	-
Showing Off .10	13	Wrong Answer
Come Across .11	8	Wrong Answer
Show Up .12	9	Wrong Answer
Took Off .13	8	Wrong Answer
Get Into .14	8	Wrong Answer
Look After .15	8	Wrong Answer
Broke Down .16	15	Wrong Answer
Turn Off .17	6	Wrong Answer
Run .18	13	Wrong Answer
Give In .19	11	Wrong Answer
Drop In .20	18	Wrong Answer

The results show that many students are confused by the multiple meanings of some phrasal verbs with two or three different meanings, making them challenging. They avoided answering some questions.

4.4 Category 3- Errors of Excellent grade students

The third category (15_20) is considered excellent because of its marks "A". Which are 100%, we have only{ 3}students. This indicates that there are outstanding students who perform well in phrasal verbs.

Phrasal Verb	Number of Students with Incorrect Answers	Type of Error
Look Down On .1	out of 3 2	Wrong Answer
Put Off .2	1	Wrong Answer
Broke Down .3	2	Wrong Answer
Run .4	1	Wrong Answer
Give In .5	1	Wrong Answer
Drop In .6	2	Wrong Answer

5. Discussion

Discussing the research results

From the research, it became clear that students had issues in telling apart inseparable and separable phrasal verbs as well as deciding on whether they were intransitive or transitive. Students performed much better with phrasal verbs used by most people than with expressions unique to English. Wierszycka, (2012) and Workman, (1993) already noticed how tricky it is for non-native English speakers to use phrasal verbs due to their unusual nature and how they are built. Along with Yong, (2015), this study showed that students often hesitate to use phrasal verbs out of fear that they might use them inappropriately. When dealing with phrasal verbs that involve object pronouns, the subject had a hard time telling them apart and this happens frequently for L2 English speakers, as highlighted in the Khumbangly, (2005) study. In addition, many learners rely on simple meanings too much, hinting that their understanding of figures of speech needs improvement, as Smith (1925) also discovered.

Difficulties in Understanding and Using Phrasal Verbs

This showed that the present research has identified several problems related to students' difficulties acquiring phrasal verbs. In the first group, as many as 52% of the students did not choose the correct answers, which indicates the students' difficulties with further developing these comparatively complex linguistic structures. The second group performed moderately well, with a comprehension rate of 43 per cent, but with many errors. The third group fared better; only 5% of the answers were wrong, thus depicting a better understanding among the students. These results support other works on the argument that idiom-based and uneven distribution of phrasal verbs represents an essential problem for learners of English as a second language (Quirk et al., 1985). This clearly shows the urgent need for a précised and methodical approach in teaching phrasal verbs among the students.

Phrasal verbs incompetence among students

One of the emerging findings from the study is that students prefer to omit phrasal verbs entirely and instead replace them with simple single-word verbs. This may be due to difficulties sequenced by phrasal verbs, especially since most learners consider them less transparent than mono phrasal ones. According to Smith (1925), the reason for problems with phrasal verbs is that the meaning of their parts cannot always be inferred. In the case of students whose first language does not have structures of a similar kind, this impinges on them even more. The study establishes that this behaviour is informed by low frequency and little use of phrasal verbs in oral and written language.

Structural and Semantic Complexity of Phrasal verbs

This led to another common observation the author made: students have problems understanding the structure and semantics of phrasal verbs. Students were perplexed concerning how adding some prepositions or adverbs changed the verb's meaning. Unfortunately, Hamed (2018) opines that phrasal verbs, although translatable, exhibit what might be deemed illogical movements that seem random and arbitrary, limiting the understanding of the actual and further apprehension on their usage. Moreover, English is grammar rich in phrasal verbs,

which are way beyond the count in other languages, due to which it becomes exceedingly cumbersome for learners to learn them, as pointed out in Hulstijn & Marchena (1989). Students were unaware of how phrasal verbs work, let alone how to apply them, which was also revealed in this study.

6. Conclusion

Phrasal verbs are acknowledged worldwide as the most challenging component in learning English in terms of grammar, where EFL is mainly practised. One of the reasons for referring to them as idiomatic is because they are generally hard to understand and use correctly. However, a proper understanding of the role of phrasal verbs is valuable while learning the English language to the extent that the demographics of the speakers and writers prefer its application. Some questions under investigation are why phrasal verbs are a challenging feature of the second language, why students often avoid using the phrasal verbs, which type of phrasal verbs are most problematic, and how effective learning can be enhanced. Knowledge of these factors is vital in improving teaching strategies to strengthen decision-making and assist the learners in addressing those linguistic barriers.

7. Recommendations

However, to translate that into a more effective method of helping students with phrasal

verbs, it must be much more targeted and helpful. From the above findings, curriculum design should incorporate instruction in phrasal verbs so that lessons meet the needs of the learners and the culture and language in which they exist. To ensure teachers effectively teach phrasal verbs, they must be trained on better teaching them effectively, primarily through methodologies and simplicity in the strategies used. Also, learners should be encouraged to use the phrasal verbs outside the classroom through such activities as singing, responding to puzzles and games, and even relaying real-life situations. This implies that textbook designers should include such MWEs in their respective courses to expose the students to many examples (Hamed, 2018). By following these suggestions, EFL learners would enhance their control over the phrasal verbs and help raise their English language ability.

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