

Under-representation of Phrasal Verbs in EFL University Students' Free Writing

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Abstract: *This study investigates the use of phrasal verbs by EFL students and calls for a more realistic expectation. A total of 444 phrasal verbs were found in 84 essays written by Arabic-speaking male and female university students. Most of these verbs (82%) were correctly produced, a finding that shows that phrasal verbs are not as problematic as they are portrayed in previous studies. Under-representation of these constructions in written production is a natural phenomenon in classroom EFL learning situations. The non-use of phrasal verbs could be attributed not only to avoidance but also to ignorance and passive learning for comprehension. EFL students' overt errors in the use of phrasal verbs need to be carefully analyzed with regard to the underlying interlingual and intralingual strategies. To help EFL students learn phrasal verbs both implicit and explicit instruction are recommended.*

Key words: *phrasal verbs, idiomatic phrasal verbs, avoidance, ignorance, errors*

Introduction

The literature on teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) indicates that phrasal verbs have a reputation of being problematic for the students around the world. Over years, researchers have been stressing the importance of these verbs in communication in EFL (e.g. Khatib and Ghannadi, 2011; Kharitonova, 2013; Marks, 2005). However, the findings of their studies show that EFL learners face difficulties in using such verbs variously known as multi-word verbs, group verbs, merged verbs, poly-word verbs, compound verbs, two-part and three-part word verbs, verb-particle combinations, discontinuous verbs, and verb and adverb combinations, (Ayadi, 2010; Saiya, 2011). There is a unanimous agreement among researchers upon the constituents of a phrasal verb: a verb followed by an adverb or a preposition or both. However, researchers differ in their definition of this multi-word unit of language. Some definitions (e.g. Akbari, 2009; Bolton, 2012) focus on the idiomaticity of these verbs where the meaning of the verb+particle combination cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual words. Thus, like an idiom, a phrasal verb is a combination of two or three words functioning as a unit of meaning. Other definitions (e.g. Marks, 2005), however, include both idiomatic as well as non-idiomatic ones. Phrasal verbs are generally semantically classified into three types: (1) literal, non-idiomatic, transparent, (2) complete, semi-idiomatic, semi-transparent, and (3)

idiomatic, opaque, metaphorical, figurative, (see e.g. Ayadi, 2010; Liao and Fukuya, 2002; Saiya, 2011; Saleh, 2011). Because the particle in the completive phrasal verbs adds to the meaning but does not change it (e.g. *wake up, finish off*), some researchers (e.g. Kharitonova, 2013) consider them as non-idiomatic. This two-way classification is adopted in the present study for pedagogical purposes.

As indicated earlier, phrasal verbs are widely used by the native speakers of English in their oral and written communication. According to Bolton (2012, n.p.) “no native English speaker would speak even for a few minutes without using one or more of them.” In case of EFL, their frequent use indicates a near-native command of the language. Native-like competence in the use of phrasal verbs is unattainable in EFL situations where the learners’ exposure to the language is confined to a few hours per of classroom instruction. This fact is corroborated by the findings of a number of studies conducted with EFL students from different linguistic backgrounds. The following is a list of a few examples of such studies:

Students	Studies
Arab	Ayadi, 2010; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989
Chinese	Liao & Fukuya, 2002; Yan, 2010
Dutch	Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989
French	Redmond, 2013
Iranian	Khatib & Ghannadi, 2011
Israeli	Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989
Malaysian	Akbari, 2009
Norwegian	Kharitonova, 2013
Russian	Kharitonova, 2013
Swedish	Laufer & Eliasson, 1993
Thai	Saiya, 2011

These researchers believe that the students ‘avoid’ phrasal verbs because they are difficult. However, as Mahmoud (2013, p. 62) says, “avoidance is only one reason for the non-use of certain language items.” ‘Avoidance’ implies intention and choice not to use a certain language form. A student may not use a form due to the lack of knowledge of that form. In this case, there is no intention or choice. Assuming that ‘avoidance’ is the reason behind the non-use of phrasal verbs by EFL students, some researchers (e.g. Khatib and Ghannadi, 2011; Redmond, 2013) used controlled production tests (multiple-choice, gap-filling, matching phrasal verbs with their meanings, etc.) for data collection. However, these are recognition tasks that can be used to assess the students’ passive knowledge of phrasal verbs. Translation from the first language to EFL is a production task but it does not guarantee that the students will use phrasal verbs as Matter’s (2003) study shows. It goes without saying that pushed output is not realistic and does

not reflect language production in natural communication situations where the language users have the choice of how to say what they want to say. The findings of some studies (e.g. Marks, 2005) are mere speculations based on informal observation. Few studies (e.g. Bolton, 2012) distinguish between idiomatic and non-idiomatic phrasal verbs when discussing EFL students' problems in this area. This lack of distinction leaves the reader under the impression that both types are problematic.

The present study is intended to address the drawbacks inherent in the previous studies. It was also motivated by informal observation of university EFL students' use of phrasal verbs in their free written compositions. The use of phrasal verbs by EFL students needs to be viewed more positively and realistically as long as their communication is accurate and appropriate and native speaker competence is unattainable. To the best of the present researcher's knowledge, very few studies have so far been published about the problems of Arabic-speaking EFL university students in the area of phrasal verbs. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) speculated some unsubstantiated difficulties in only half a page of a book on Arab students' errors in EFL in general. In a masters thesis, Ayadi (2010) used only recognition tasks (e.g. translation of EFL phrasal verbs into Arabic) as a data collection tool.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the purpose of this study, 84 free-written essays were scrutinized. They were two to three pages long and they were written by Arabic-speaking male and female second-year university students majoring in EFL. The essays were written as part of the weekly assignments of an essay writing course. The students were asked to compile a list of argumentative topics of their own choice. The most popular topics were:

1. Describe and evaluate a course you studied at the university
2. The mobile phone: A blessing or a curse?
3. Describe and evaluate a social tradition in your community

The essays were photocopied; the original versions were corrected and returned to the students for feedback. A total of 444 phrasal verbs were used in the 84 essays (i.e. about 5 phrasal verbs per essay) of which 364 (82%) were correct and 80 (18%) were incorrect. The non-idiomatic phrasal verbs were 390 (87.8%) and the idiomatic ones were 54 (12.2%). The correct non-idiomatic phrasal verbs were 327 (84%) and the incorrect ones were 63 (16%). The idiomatic phrasal verbs (54) were used in 36 essays which means that not all essays contained idiomatic phrasal verbs. The correct idiomatic phrasal verbs were 37 (68.5%) and the incorrect ones were 17 (31.5%). These figures can be summarized in the following table.

Table (1)

Number and Percentage of Idiomatic and Non-idiomatic

Phrasal Verbs Used in 84 Essays

	Used		Correct		Incorrect	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Non-idiomatic	390	88	327	84	63	16
Idiomatic	54	12	37	68.5	17	31
Total	444	100	364	82	80	18

The data collected for this study shows that EFL university students did use phrasal verbs in their free writing and most of the verbs (82%) were correct. Naturally, the non-idiomatic phrasal verbs (88%) were far more than the idiomatic ones (12%). Hence researchers need to differentiate between the two types and show the magnitude of the problem in each type. Of course, the total number of phrasal verbs used in 84 essays could have been more than 444 if the students' proficiency level in EFL were higher. About five phrasal verbs per essay may not be satisfactory compared to a larger number that could have been produced by a competent user of the language. Thus, EFL students' non-use of phrasal verbs need not be exaggerated. They should be viewed like other multi-word units of meaning (e.g. idioms) which are usually under-represented in EFL students' production in EFL classroom learning contexts. The small number of errors (18%) compared to the correctly used phrasal verbs also indicates that the problem is not as serious as it is projected in the previous studies.

As stated earlier, researchers attribute under-representation of phrasal verbs to 'avoidance'. However, it is not easy to differentiate between avoidance and ignorance even if a student uses a single word (e.g. continue) instead of a phrasal verb (*go on*). The non-use of phrasal verbs by EFL students need to be explained carefully since it could be due to the lack of knowledge and incomplete learning. It could also be due to the internalization of these verbs as passive knowledge to be used for recognition and comprehension. The errors committed in the use of phrasal verbs in this study (18%) indicate that the students take the risk and attempt to use both idiomatic and non-idiomatic phrasal verbs. Thus, the use of the term 'avoidance' not only exaggerates the problem of the under-representation of phrasal verbs but it also ignores 'ignorance' and passive learning as its possible reasons. Whether it is due to avoidance or ignorance, under-representation of phrasal verbs in classroom EFL learning situations is as normal as the lack of knowledge of any other single-word or multi-word vocabulary items. Avoidance is a natural communication strategy. EFL learners, or even competent speakers, cannot be blamed for using alternative language forms to express their ideas. Language users – both learners and competent users – have the natural right to employ compensatory achievement

strategies of communication whereby they can express their ideas using alternative language forms. Avoidance does not necessarily result in error. In fact, it is a strategy used to avoid error. Instead of worrying about the ‘foreignness’ of EFL learners’ language due to the non-use of phrasal verbs, researchers can focus on more serious language problems (e.g. errors in single-word vocabulary items) affecting accuracy and comprehensibility. The total number of phrasal verbs (444) used by the students in this study may be less than expected because they might have used single-word verbs instead. Thus, the students might have avoided some possible phrasal verb errors such as the use of the wrong verb or the omission or substitution or mis-ordering of the particle.

Apart from performance mistakes and slips, all language errors are basically due to ignorance (i.e. the lack of the requisite linguistic knowledge). This lack of competence in the language leads to the use of cognitive strategies in communication such as avoidance, interlingual and intralingual transfer. The non-use of phrasal verbs by EFL students is due either to the influence of the first language or the complexity of the second/foreign language, (Kharitonova, 2013; Sara and Mohammadreza, 2013). Ayadi (2010), for example, believes that avoidance of phrasal verbs by Arab EFL learners is due to interlingual transfer, that is, students avoid phrasal verbs because there are no such constructions in Arabic. However, it is difficult to tell whether the problem is interlingual or intralingual since phrasal verbs are not used even if EFL learners have equivalent constructions in their first language, (Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989). In case of Arab learners of EFL, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the students know two varieties of Arabic: modern standard Arabic (MSA) and non-standard Arabic (NSA). There are no phrasal verbs in NSA. There are about nine verbs (e.g. *kharaja*) that take particles in MSA and the meaning of the verb changes with each particle (e.g. *kharaja bi* = *take out, infer* – *kharaja ala* = *rebel against, violate* – *kharaja an* = *deviate from, exceed*).

From the present researcher’s experience in teaching English-Arabic-English translation for 25 years, students sometimes find it difficult to understand MSA phrasal verbs let alone using them. This could possibly be due to the influence of NSA or the complexity of MSA. Thus, the under-representation of EFL phrasal verbs in Arab students’ production could be due to (1) the complexity within EFL, (2) the absence of equivalent forms in NSA which is the mother tongue of the Arabs, or (3) the non-use of phrasal verbs in MSA because of their inherent complexity or because of the influence of NSA. In some cases, the influence of Arabic (MSA or NSA) can be seen in the errors students commit when they attempt to produce EFL phrasal verbs. The following are examples of the errors found in the essays scrutinized for the purpose of this study.

1. Mobile phones break ^ families (up)
2. If the car breaks ^ , you can call ... (down)

In the examples above, the particles ‘*up*’ and ‘*down*’ were omitted most probably because the verb ‘*break*’ was believed to convey the meanings conveyed by the single-word verbs used in Arabic.

... marriage will end with divorce. (in)

3. They do not put into consideration ... (take)

The substitution errors in examples 3 and 4 could also be due to interlingual transfer from MSA or NSA. In example 3, the Arabic verb '*yantahi*' (= *to end*) takes the preposition '*bi*' which is rendered as '*with*'. In example 4, the Arabic verb used in this context is equivalent to '*put*', not '*take*'.

4. People run towards the benefits (after)
5. The usefulness lies on the technique (in)

In examples 5 and 6 above, it is not possible to explain the error in terms of the influence of Arabic. If the students had transferred the Arabic particle '*wara*' and '*fi*', they might have produced '*after*' and '*in*' respectively.

6. Break down relationship (up)
7. Result ^ a lot of problems (in)

The error in example 7 could be attributed to the confusion between '*break up*' and '*break down*'. The Arabic equivalents are single-word verbs. The omission of the particle in '*in*' example 8 could also be intralingual since the equivalent Arabic verb is followed by a preposition.

To sum up, researchers do not need to be unduly worried about the non-use of phrasal verbs by students because it is a natural phenomenon in EFL classroom learning situations. It is normal for the students to resort to a compensatory strategy and use single-word verbs instead of phrasal verbs. Single-word verbs are not only economical but they are believed to be more precise in expressing meaning, (Marks, 2005). The non-use of phrasal verbs should not always be interpreted as avoidance; it could also be due to ignorance (i.e. the lack of knowledge) or passive learning for comprehension. The foregoing discussion shows that distinguishing between avoidance and ignorance is as difficult as telling whether the non-use is interlingual or intralingual and whether the interlingual problems are due to MSA or NSA in case of Arab learners of EFL. Hence, this study calls for a more realistic and optimistic view of students' use of EFL phrasal verbs. It also shows the need for appropriate data collection tools and a more careful and in-depth analysis of the problems that EFL learners face in this area. Further studies are needed for a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of under-representation of phrasal verbs in EFL learners' free production. Studies are also needed to shed more light on the role of the two varieties of Arabic (MSA and NSA) in the use and non-use of phrasal verbs by Arabic-speaking learners of EFL.

Pedagogical Implications

Like other single-word and multi-word units of meaning, phrasal verbs are numerous and important and their acquisition requires rich and varied exposure to the language. Native-speaker competence is an ideal that cannot be attained in EFL learning contexts. As it is the case with other vocabulary items, including phrasal verbs in the input and recycling them is an important first step in the teaching process. With regard to deliberate teaching, it is believed that memorizing lists of phrasal verbs does not guarantee their correct usage (Bolton, 2012). In fact, memorization does not guarantee long term learning. As Bolton (ibid) says, students memorize lists to pass tests and examinations but in natural communication they use alternative forms. According to Pye (1996) the most common and most important 200 phrasal verbs can be highlighted. However, it is not clear whether these phrasal verbs are to be presented in a separate section as a separate activity or within the listening and reading comprehension texts of the language course. It could be a good idea to draw the students' attention to some confusable phrasal verbs in the language such as *put off – put out*, *break up – break down*, *pass out – pass away* and *hang on – hang up*. Common collocations can also be highlighted, especially those where errors are frequently committed (e.g. *deprive of*, *insist on*, *contribute to*, *turn on*). Such noticing activities are believed to help in processing and facilitate learning, (Izumi, 2002; Khatib and Ghannadi, 2011). Whether phrasal verbs are taught implicitly or explicitly, teachers need to have realistic expectations about the students' achievement since learning is in the eye of the beholder. Input does not become intake for all students all the time and what is internalized as active knowledge by some students may remain passive for some others and may not be learned at all by some others.

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