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The avoidance of phrasal verbs by adult Chinese immigrants: The effective exposure to the L2 environment, language proficiency and the causes of avoidance behaviour

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The study reported in this paper identifies the influences of exposure to a second language (L2) environment and language proficiency on the avoidance of phrasal verbs among Chinese immigrants residing in the UK. It then discusses the social and psycholinguistic aspects of the causes behind this behaviour. Four Chinese groups and one native-speaker group (total 55 participants) took a multiple-choice test and completed a questionnaire. There were two major findings: 1) Exposure itself does not necessarily lead to non-avoidance of phrasal verbs, as the Chinese immigrants with lower language proficiency still avoid using them after a number of years residence in the UK; 2) Language proficiency affects the L2 speakers' avoidance behaviour. The results suggest that effective exposure to the target language environment when combined with advanced language proficiency, positively reduces the Chinese immigrant participants' avoidance behaviour when using phrasal verbs, and also confirms that avoidance behaviour is consistent with the interlanguage development framework proposed by (Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

Keywords: avoidance; phrasal verbs; social and psychological impacts; Chinese users of English

Introduction

One of the strategies learners may resort to while learning a new language is avoidance. The strategy of avoidance has been observed in not only second language acquisition (Ellis, 1984) but also in learning or acquiring L1 (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). In relation to second language learning and teaching, avoidance normally means that L2 learners deliberately choose one form over an alternative. This can be observed in semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology, and is classified into four types: meaning replacement, message abandonment, topic avoidance and form avoidance (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Tarone, 1981; Varadi, 1980).

Meaning replacement, topic avoidance and message abandonment may happen in all types of communication between and beyond the same language interlocutors. They have been recognised as one of the communication and learning strategies by Tarone (1981), to avoid some sensitive topics or information that may cause the breakdown of communication. Form avoidance or the avoidance of particular syntax or lexical features has been found where relative clauses, passive structures, present progressive, infinitive complement, direct object pronoun structures, and phrasal verbs should be applied by L2 learners who speak a variety of first languages including Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish (see, Dagut & Laufer, 1985; El-Dakhs, 2016; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Kleinmann, 1978; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Sara & Mohammadreza, 2013; Schachter, 1974; You, 1999). This behaviour has been interpreted within the repertoire of contrastive analysis such as

rhetoric differences, cross-language impacts such as L1-L2 influences, and psycholinguistics such as the reduction of anxiety in language learning (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

However, the previous studies mostly focused on the school environment and ESL/EFL student learners; few studies have been conducted on the use of phrasal verbs by adult immigrants, and the influence of English immersion on their use of phrasal verbs. Hence, this study attempts to analyse the impact of the exposure to an L2 environment and that of language proficiency on the avoidance of phrasal verbs among Chinese immigrants. This study also employed L1 Chinese students who have not been exposed or only exposed for several days to an English environment (so that the impact of an English environment on their use of English can be discounted), in order to unveil the reasons behind the corresponding behaviour and to discover implications for future research.

Literature Review

The definition of phrasal verbs
Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English defines phrasal verbs as:

> Phrasal verbs are multi-word units consisting of a verb followed by an adverbial particle (e.g. carry out, find out, or pick up). These adverbial particles all have core spatial or locative meaning (e.g. out, in, up, down, on, off); however, they are commonly used with extended meanings [and] comprise relatively idiomatic units and function like single verbs
> Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999, p. 403)

There are two types of phrasal verbs (literal and figurative) and something in between, based on their semantic transparency (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Teng, 2017). For example: Semantically, *stand up* is a literal phrasal verb while *make up* means *invent* in certain contexts, which makes it a figurative phrasal verb.

Avoidance of Phrasal Verbs
The correct usage of phrasal verbs has been seen as one of the difficulties of learning English by L2 learners. Reasons are associated with their enormous number, their seemingly arbitrary production and their nonstop emergence in modern English (Darwin & Gray, 1999; Gardner & Davies, 2007). Likewise, the characteristics of polysemy, idiomatic and context-specificity of phrasal verbs also make L2 learners uneasy when they try to use them in a native-like way (Larsen-Freeman, 2013; Liu, 2012a, 2012b; White, 2012).

Phrasal verbs possess some special linguistic features, such as subtle connotation (Side, 1990), syntactic restrictions (Cornell, 1985), and sophisticated intonation and stress (Darwin & Gray, 1999; McArthur, 1989). When L2 users have not yet reached sufficient language proficiency, it may be difficult for them to be aware and use phrasal verbs semantically and pragmatically properly. For instance:

> *come by* has the connotation of difficulty or even of dishonesty (as in *I wonder how he came by that money*) (Cornell, 1985, p. 275).

> *get over* is normally only used in negative sentences and nearly always with the modal *can/could* (Cornell, 1985, p. 275).

These subtle linguistic features are possessed naturally and early by native speakers, but provoke a high workload for non-native speakers, forcing them to learn and master phrasal verbs for almost each individual context (McArthur, 1989). Hence, the usage of phrasal verbs can be seen as one of the important indicators of second language proficiency (Liu, 2008).

In addition, first language interference has also been perceived as an influential factor that affects L2 learners' use of phrasal verbs. It is widely acknowledged that the degree of similarity between L1 and L2 influences L2 learners' ability to employ or avoid phrasal verbs. L2 learners whose native language is not in the Germanic family may feel it more challenging to understand, learn and adapt phrasal verbs in English (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Yildiz, 2016).

For example, Dutch and Swedish contain phrasal verbs as English does (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993), whereas Chinese and Hebrew do not have a similar or equivalent phrasal verb structure to that in English (Chen, 2007; Dagut & Laufer, 1985). It is not surprising that in a case study of Dutch and Swedish language users, scholars did not identify a significantly different phrasal-verb avoidance behaviour to that of native English speakers, even though they produced a smaller number of idiomatic phrasal verbs than native speakers (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). Hence, a seemingly similar L1 language background alleviates the potential avoidance of phrasal verbs.

However, the situation is more complex in the studies of L1 Chinese and L1 Hebrew speakers. Dagut and Laufer (1985) did not identify any obvious avoidance behaviour among Hebrew-speaking learners, but by comparison Liao and Fukuya (2004) observed avoidance behaviour among Chinese students at the intermediate level and less than 9 months English environment immersion, but not in their counterparts at an advanced English level and with more than 9 months studying at an American university.

To explain the non-avoidance of phrasal verbs by those Chinese students at advanced English levels, Liao and Fukuya (2004) suggested that "the L1-L2 differences affect learners only up to a certain level of English proficiency" (pp. 218-219) and hypothesised that "the advanced Chinese learners' exposure to the L2 environment might have been an important factor in their non-avoidance of phrasal verbs" (p. 218). This has been partially supported by Siyanova and Schmitt (2007). They compared 65 natives to 65 advanced non-natives from non-Germanic language countries in the use of phrasal verbs, and noted that "while a lengthy stay in an English speaking environment decreased the likelihood of using one-word verbs, it did not increase the likelihood of using the corresponding multi-word verbs" (p. 130).

The cultural differences between L1 and L2 also place L2 learners in a challenging situation. The different conceptual comprehension among various countries about some words, like *up/down*, *on/off* and *open/close*, can cause the misuse of phrasal verbs (Side, 1990). Side (1990) exemplified that, "in Greece, radios are not turned 'up' or 'down' as in England and other English-speaking countries. Instead they are 'opened' or 'closed' – a different concept altogether" (p. 145). Likewise, the light or TV is *opened* or *closed* in Chinese, rather than being *switched on* or *off* in English.

The play-it-safe strategy is another explanation for the avoidance phenomenon when non-native speakers cannot ascertain full knowledge (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989) but, instead, overgeneralise the semantically equivalent one-word verbs to all kinds of situations. This has been observed by Krashen (1981). He noted that after L2 learners have mastered the functionally equivalent one-word verbs, they tend to give up learning the more context-specific, syntactically arbitrary phrasal verbs.

Reflecting on the process of learning phrasal verbs, Sawyer (2000) noticed that those with transparent meanings (literal) were learned first by L2 learners and then later those with idiomatic interpretation (figurative). This is consistent with the findings of Larsen-Freeman (2013). Generally, if the idiomatic feature that figurative phrasal verbs possess is considered, there is an obvious greater requirement on language learners' ability if they want to master them. For example:

make up (a story) compared to *come in* (a room)

After learners know the meanings of *come* and *in*, it is relatively easy to deduce the meaning of *come in*; however, *make up* has various interpretations in a variety of contexts. It needs more linguistic knowledge to be able to speculate on the appropriate meaning in a particular setting.

The characteristics of immigrants in learning L2
Immigrants have some particular characteristics when learning and using L2. A large amount of research shows the unsatisfactory and insufficient language proficiency among immigrants who have moved into English speaking countries after a certain age (see, for example, Cummins, 1991; Jia & Aaronson, 2003). Only a few of these older immigrants may reach a native-like English level and many may never employ English at a satisfactory level.

There are many reasons that older immigrants struggle to achieve proficiency. In addition to the effectiveness of exposure to the L2 environment, factors such as social and psychological distance and acculturation, also play an influential role in the language acquisition of L2 learners, especially immigrants (Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016; Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi, 2003; Schumann, 1976). Motivation is also seen as a cause. Krashen (1981) pointed out that L2 learners who possess integrative motivation generally form a lower filter and therefore may reach a higher language proficiency. The strong desire to merge into the country they have settled in, tends to facilitate the immigrants' L2 acquisition, and vice versa. Schumann (1976) demonstrated the impact of immigrants' pidginization of their target language learning by employing a single longitudinal case study of a 33 year old Costa Rican, which determined the influence of social and psychological distance to L2 learners' language acquisition.

Given the above discussion, the research reported here focuses on the following research questions:

1. Do adult Chinese immigrants demonstrate avoidance behaviour in usage of phrasal verbs?
2. Do adult Chinese immigrants have a preference for particular types of phrasal verbs?
3. To what extent is the exposure to an L2 environment related to the Chinese immigrants' avoidance behaviour?
4. To what extent do cross-language features, such as social distance and acculturation, affect the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Chinese immigrants?

Methodology

Participants
Fifty five participants were recruited to take part in this study. Among them, 15 were adult British native speakers, 20 were Chinese immigrants residing in the UK and 20 were Chinese students who had just arrived and enrolled in a Russell Group British university. The non-native speakers were divided into four groups with 10 members each, according to their length of residence and language proficiencies. The groups consisted of: 10 Chinese immigrants at advanced English (IA), 10 with intermediate English (II), 10 Chinese students with advanced English (SA) and 10 Chinese students with intermediate English (SI). The native-speaker participants constituted a control group to identify preferences for phrasal verbs. They were professionals working in a variety of occupations, such as, engineering, administration and medicine, aged between 25 and 43 years old.

Twenty Chinese immigrants, 4 male and 16 female, were aged between 28 and 46 years old. They had resided in the UK between 4 years and 15 years; spoke English in their working environment or daily life; and their English level was at intermediate or above. They were selected through the snowball sampling method, and were contacted through several existing Chinese immigrants' societies in the larger cities of the UK.

Because of the unfeasibility of putting these participants into a conventional English language proficiency examination, their English levels are categorised by a package of measures. All of them had taken and passed the *Life in the UK* British citizenship test, which is equal to the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Entry 3 level or the Intermediate 1 level (UK Border Agency, 2013). Ten of them were categorised into the intermediate level group, as they only held certificates from Chinese high schools. Three of them has taken intermediate level English classes in language training schools in the UK. Among them, 4 were housewives, 2 were self-employed, 2 worked in Chinese-owned companies, and 2 worked in their husbands' family business. Three had been settled in the UK for 4 years, 5 for 5 years, and 2 for 10 years. The other 10 Chinese immigrants were classified as advanced English speakers because they all held university degrees from China. Four of them had master degrees awarded in the UK. They all worked in British corporations or associations as accountants, teachers, etc., and English was their social and working language. Three had been settled in the UK for 3 years, 4 for 6 years, 2 for 10 years, and 1 for 15 years. All of the immigrants' family annual incomes were over £40,000 annually, compared to the gross income of the middle fifth of non-retired households in 2010/11 which was £37,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2013).

The other two groups of participants were Chinese students who had just arrived in the UK for tertiary study. They had all graduated from Chinese universities and had never been exposed to an authentic English environment in the past. All of them had attained IELTS test scores. One group (SA) scored on average 7 and above. The other group's (SI) results were between 5 and 6.5.

Research Design
Data for this study were conducted through a multiple-choice test and a questionnaire (see Appendices A and B). The former was used to ascertain avoidance behaviour and the latter to assess the length of their exposure to the target language environment. The native speakers only took the multiple-choice test in order to identify their preference for phrasal verbs rather than their one-word equivalents. To neutralise order effects, and reduce the

interaction and counteraction of the two methods, half of the participants took the test first and then the questionnaire, the other half did it in the reverse order.

The choice of phrasal verbs
The 20 phrasal verbs involved in this study were selected based on the criteria that they: 1) belong to the *Top 100 Phrasal Verbs Lemmas in BNC* (Gardner & Davies, 2007); 2) consist of 10 figurative and 10 literal items; 3) have one-word verb equivalents semantically, but where the native speakers in this study prefer to use the phrasal verbs; 4) are in the scope of participants with intermediate level English (see Table 1). In fact, the 20 phrasal verbs selected for the test are all in the top 50 phrasal verbs lemmas which cover 42.7% of all phrasal verb occurrences in the BNC (Gardner & Davies, 2007).

Table 1. List of 20 phrasal verbs and one-word verbs used in the tests (adapted from Gardner & Davies, 2007)

Phrasal verbs		Ranking	% of PV	Token frequency	One-word Equivalents
Literal	bring in	37	0.5	2,505	get
	come in	15	0.9	4,814	enter
	come on	14	0.9	4,830	start
	find out	9	1.3	6,619	discover
	get back	20	0.9	4,552	return
	get up	25	0.8	3,936	rise
	go down	16	0.9	4,781	reduce
	go out	7	1.5	7,688	leave
	put down	32	0.6	2,873	lay
	take off	42	0.4	2,163	remove
Figurative	carry out	2	2.1	10,798	obey
	give up	24	0.8	4,186	surrender
	go on	1	2.9	14,903	continue
	make up	11	1.1	5,469	invent
	pick up	4	1.7	9,037	collect
	set out	18	0.9	4,633	present
	set up	3	2.0	10,360	establish
	take on	23	0.8	4,199	accept
	take over	12	1.0	5,420	acquire
	work out	17	0.9	4,703	develop

Note. % of PV = % of phrasal verbs

The questionnaire
Exposure is interpreted as the number of years participants had spent in English speaking countries (Krashen, 1981) or *naturalistic settings* (Ellis, 2008), which neglects the effectiveness of the exposure, as hearing the target language is not necessarily equivalent to effective input. Likewise, the length of time studying in an English-speaking university is not necessarily contingent with that of exposure to the L2 environment.

In order to obtain an accurate exposure time to the target language, some researchers have tried a variety of methodologies, such as, questionnaires (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz,

& Halter, 2004; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007), checklists (Kaplan, 1989) and open-ended diaries (Ginsberg & Miller, 2000; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Some researchers emphasise the amount of time that L2 learners spend on interacting with the target language (Ginsberg & Miller, 2000; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013) rather than their passive exposure time. In the present study, the meaning of exposure is consistent with that defined as input, output and interaction by Ranta and Meckelborg (2013).

Multiple-choice test data process
20 dialogues were presented (see Appendix A). Among the four choices, one was the phrasal verb preferred by native speakers, one was the semantically equivalent one-word verb, and the other two were distractors, which also consisted of one phrasal verb and one one-word verb. There was a total of 80 choices for each participant, consisting of 20 figurative phrasal verbs, 20 literal phrasal verbs and 40 one-word verbs. The distractors were deliberately chosen to be simple and unrelated to the dialogues, in an attempt to reduce the error rate. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves as one of the speakers in order to enhance the colloquial feeling of the verb selection.

Data analysis

Findings of multiple-choice test
The statistical test methods conducted in this study was a (5 × 2) factorial repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with participant groups as a between-subjects variable and phrasal-verb types as a within-subjects variable.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of phrasal verbs in the multiple choice test

Group	PV	M	SD	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
NS	Total	0.92	0.03	0.90	0.93
	Fig	0.90	0.08	0.86	0.94
	Lit	0.93	0.06	0.90	0.97
IA	Total	0.94	0.03	0.92	0.96
	Fig	0.94	0.07	0.89	0.99
	Lit	0.94	0.07	0.89	0.99
SA	Total	0.82	0.05	0.78	0.86
	Fig	0.80	0.13	0.70	0.90
	Lit	0.84	0.07	0.79	0.89

		M	SD		
II	Total	0.80	0.08	0.74	0.86
	Fig	0.73	0.13	0.63	0.83
	Lit	0.89	0.09	0.83	0.95
SI	Total	0.71	0.06	0.67	0.75
	Fig	0.65	0.08	0.59	0.71
	Lit	0.77	0.08	0.71	0.83

Note. PV = phrasal verb; MCT = multiple-choice test; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval of the differences.

The output of ANOVA presents several findings: The usage of phrasal verbs among the various groups was significantly different, $F (4, 50) = 31.43$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .72$. The type of phrasal verbs used was statistically significant, $F (1, 50) = 13.69$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$. The interaction of effect between groups and phrasal-verb types was not significant, $F (4, 50) = 2.35$, $p > .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$. Post Hoc analysis (Tukey) revealed that only the Chinese immigrants with advanced English (IA) showed no differences from the native speakers (NS) ($p > 0.05$), but the rest of the groups differed from the NS group ($p < 0.05$).

At the advanced level, the Chinese immigrants with advanced English (IA) substantially differed from those Chinese students (SA) ($p < .05$); the same result had been found between the Chinese immigrants with intermediate English (II) and their Chinese students counterparts (SI). The two Chinese immigrants groups (IA and II) with different English proficiencies demonstrated appreciable dissimilarity in using phrasal verbs ($p < .05$); the same result had been found between the two Chinese students groups (SA and AI). However, there were no significant differences between the Chinese immigrants with lower language proficiency (II) and the students with advanced English (SA) in avoidance of phrasal verbs ($p > .05$). The effect sizes of non-native speakers' groups (IA, SA, II and SI) relative to the native speakers' group were $r = -0.32$, $r = 0.77$. $r = 0.70$ and $r = 0.91$ respectively.

Results and Discussion

From the multiple-choice test results:
1. Adult Chinese immigrants with advanced English did not avoid using phrasal verbs while those with intermediate English did.
2. The type of phrasal verb has an impact on Chinese immigrants and Chinese students' avoidance behaviour. They all demonstrated a preference for literal phrasal verbs rather than figurative ones.

From the questionnaire responses:
1. Only by combining effective exposure with the participants' language proficiency, may the avoidance or non-avoidance behaviour among Chinese immigrants be

explained. Native-like immersion in an English environment might be the reason that Chinese immigrants with high proficiency did not show a preference for one-word verbs rather than phrasal verbs.

2. The sociocultural and psychological factors, such as social distance and acculturation, might be reasons for Chinese immigrants' avoidance of phrasal verbs. The data collected from the self-reports showed some clear differences between the native and non-native speakers.

Adult Chinese immigrants' avoidance behaviour

It appears that Chinese immigrants with advanced English (IA) do not avoid using phrasal verbs while those with intermediate English (II) do. The former show 95% phrasal-verb usage in comparison with the latter's 81% (see Figure 1). This finding, that the shift from avoidance to non-avoidance is consistent with language proficiency, confirms Liao and Fukuya's (2004) conclusion that avoidance is part of the interlanguage development of L2 learners.
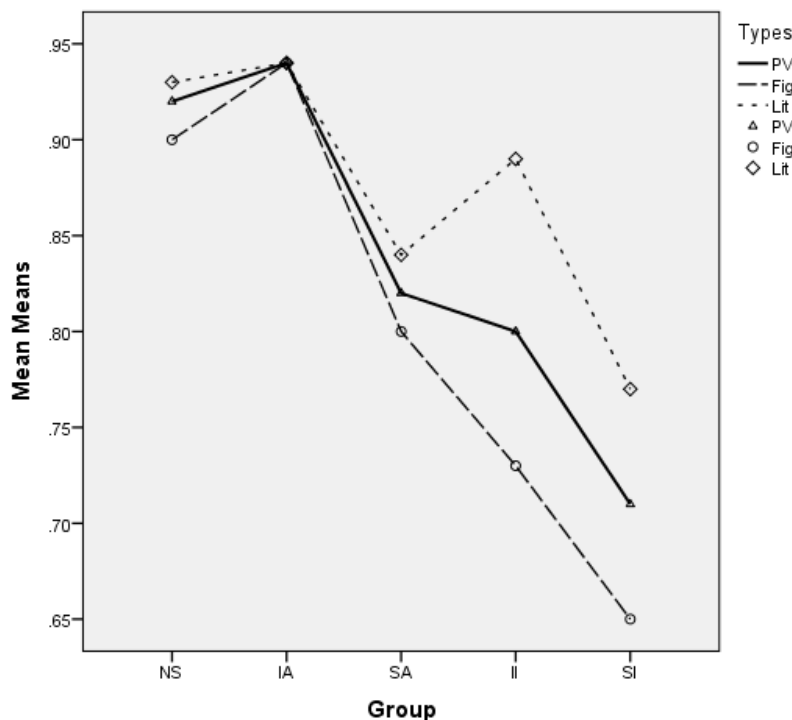

Figure 1. Comparison of means

The ANOVA output shows there is a statistically significant difference between figurative and literal phrasal verbs, but no interaction between types of phrasal-verb and the groups of participants. Although all groups chose more literal than figurative phrasal verbs in the test (see Figure 1), their choices were varied (see Figure 2). Chinese immigrants with advanced English (IA) showed a slight inclination towards literal phrasal verbs, which was not significantly different from that of native speakers. However, the other Chinese groups displayed a much greater preference for literal phrasal verbs.
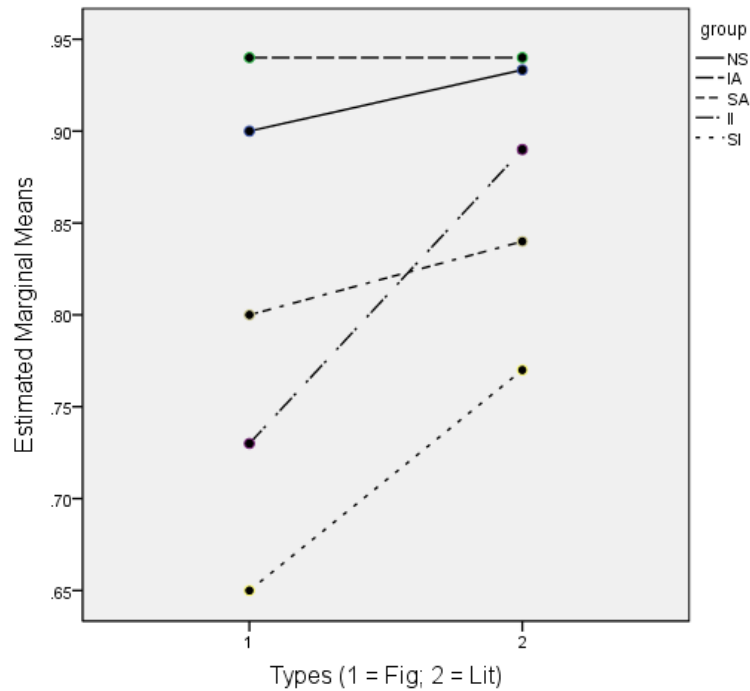
Figure 2. Means of figurative and literal phrasal verbs in groups

The impact of cross-language factors

The hours that the participants spent in the use of English weekly is illustrated in Figure 3, the Chinese immigrants with lower English proficiency (II) have much less effective exposure to the L2 environment than that of their counterparts (IA) who have higher English proficiency. The total hours they spend on English per week are one third of that of the native speakers.

The immigrants at the intermediate level (II) spent limited time using English and mostly on watching TV with the subtitles on. This type of passive input was more than half of their total affective exposure to English. The time invested on their social life in English interaction was only 5 hours a week, which is less than one third of that spent by Chinese immigrants with advanced English (IA) and one sixth of native speakers (NS). In addition, they also allocated much less time to reading English books and surfing on the English Internet (5 hours per week), compared to the 20 hours and 28 hours respectively that were used for the same purpose by the Chinese immigrants with higher language proficiency (IA) and the native speakers (NS).
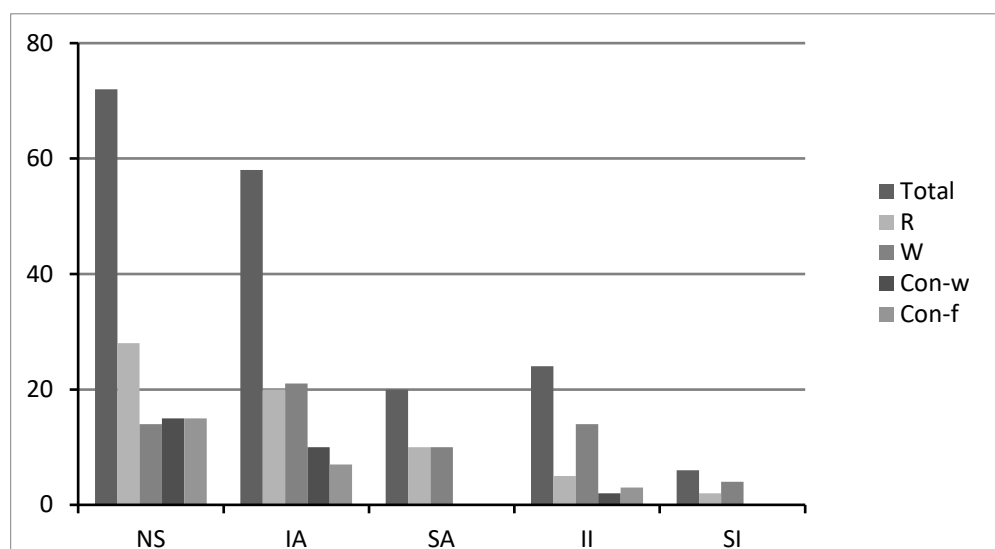
Note. R = reading, Internet use; W = TV-watching, radio-listening; Con-w = Interacting with people work-related; Con-f = Interacting with families and friends.

Figure 3. Hours per week spent by different groups

Although the Chinese immigrants at the advanced English (IA) level did immerse themselves in the English environment more than those with lower English levels, they still displayed a tendency to rely on passive input more than interaction. The length of time they invested in social life in English was slightly more than half of that spent by the native speakers, in contrast with the almost equal number of hours they spent on passive input, such as reading, surfing on the Internet, watching TV and listening to the radio (41 hours per week on average for an IA and 42 hours for a British participant).

This is convergent with the results of Jia and Aaronson (2003) which revealed a clear tendency to use L1 rather than L2 by adult Chinese subjects in their daily life, even though they had been settled in the USA for a number of years. Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) in a longitudinal case study conducted on Chinese overseas students, observed that participants received more receptive language than active interaction regardless of their individual differences. This is also consistent with Holmes' (2005) claim that, due to language competence and cultural differences, most Chinese undergraduates spend very little time communicating with native speakers.

The greater exposure to receptive language than to interaction and output, might be due to participants having a shortage of English-speaking friends, the lack of communal topics and time to interact with others, and the obstacle of an insufficient English level. However, the underlying and complex interpretation might also belong in the repertoires of cultural, social, psychological and cross-linguistics diversities.

Cross-cultural impacts

The influence of culture in language production cannot be neglected in the L2 users' linguistic behaviour, as language cannot be separated from cognitive concepts of the world (Cook, Bassetti, Kasai, Sasaki, & Takahashi, 2006). As reflected in this study, most of the Chinese students (SA and SI) and several Chinese immigrants with intermediate English (II) chose "the heating *started*" rather than "the heating *came on*" in test item 10,

because conceptually in Chinese, heating can only be started. But very few Chinese immigrants with higher language proficiency (IA) made a mistake in this item.

In the present study, the Chinese immigrants in the intermediate English group (II) have resided in the UK for many years and proclaimed their desire to assimilate into British society, the data collected in the questionnaire however demonstrates a different view of their actual lifestyle. Several of them claimed that they did not like speaking English nor feel confident or comfortable to speak to native English speakers. If they had to communicate with the outside world, they preferred to rely on the people who could speak better English. The obvious lack of interaction and communication in the target language may decrease their opportunities to improve their English and social skills, and consequently, reduce their chance to receive effective input which weakens their ability to produce meaningful output.

The *acculturation model* introduced by Schumann (1976) might be one of the possible explanations for the avoidance of phrasal verbs by those Chinese immigrants with low language proficiency. This model postulates that learners' L2 proficiency is consistent with their willingness to acculturate to the target language settings. On the other hand, effective exposure coupled with sufficient language aptitude may generate a conceptual and cognitive change, a shift of thinking and the inclination to the culture they have been immersed in as bilinguals; hence, they may perform more like native speakers (Cook et al., 2006). Having little or no exposure to a natural language setting may detract from L2 learners' chance of cognitive change and, as a consequence, offer insufficient native-like expressions.

Apart from the objective environment and their weak willingness to assimilate into the L2 societies, the pressure from their Chinese peers cannot be overlooked. The Chinese participants mentioned the feeling of isolation when they tried to speak English to other Chinese people. This stress has also been discussed in Gatbonton, Trofimovich and Magid's (2005) study on the relationship of the L2 users' pronunciation and group affiliation, and unveiled the complexity of the situation L2 users have to face.

The interaction of economic, social situation and language proficiency
In addition, the interaction between employment opportunities and language proficiency cannot be neglected when considering the use of phrasal verbs by Chinese immigrants. Among the Chinese immigrants with intermediate English (II), 4 did not work, 2 were self-employed, 2 worked in the family business and the other 2 for Chinese companies. Their life and/or work environment can be seen as a self-sufficient situation, which isolates them from the target language society. On the other hand, their language insufficiency might be the obstacle reducing their opportunities to acquire a job that can introduce them into the local society. Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) have estimated that "fluency in English increases employment probabilities by about 22 percent" (p. 696). Consequently, less involvement with the target language society leads to a broadening of social distance and the counteraction of assimilating into the local communities (Saville-Troike, 2006).

However, the situation is different in the advanced group (IA). They all had jobs in a professional field which bound them to the local community, providing them with the opportunity to socialise and interact with English users. In the period of the present study, they normally invested 17 hours per week in speaking English and interacting with their colleagues and friends, which is much more than the Chinese immigrants with lower language proficiency (II). In addition, they all claimed to have no feeling of discomfort

while talking to other English speakers, and demonstrated a strong affinity towards the local environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this research contribute in a number of ways to the understanding of the avoidance of phrasal verbs by L1 Chinese immigrants in the UK under controlled conditions and may provide stimulus for replication studies. Firstly, the present study adds a new dimension to previous studies of the usage of phrasal verbs by non-native English speakers, which have normally focused on English as a second/foreign language in school or university contexts. Secondly, the results obtained from the questionnaire in this study complement those of other research by providing more information about cross-cultural impacts on the use of phrasal verbs. Those results may also promote further studies on the diversity of non-native English speakers in using English. Finally, this study may encourage designers of pedagogy, teachers and L2 users to become aware of and try out new ways of developing the acquisition of phrasal verbs.

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Appendix A: The Multiple-Choice Test
[Note: The percentage in the brackets is that obtained with the native speakers group, showing NSs' preference for that specific phrasal verb in that particular situation.]

Please circle one option from A to D that fits best in the sentence.

1. – 'We can't ___ living like this – we need to find a bigger house for our new baby.'

    -   'I don't want to live like this, either. But I can't get a pay rise.'

    A. continue   B. show   C. go on (80%)   D. look up

2. – 'See what you've done!'

    -   'Don't blame me. I'm only ___your orders.'

    A. standing up   B carrying out (95%)   C. establish   D. obeying

3. – 'What're they talking about?'

    -   'They said they were going to ___ a charity.'

    A. bear   B. set up (85%)   C. establish   D. move back

4. – 'Could you ___ the dry cleaning on the way home?'

    -   'OK. Anything else?'

    A. pass   B. collect   C. pick up (85%)   D. give in

5. – 'What time will you ___ tonight?'

    -   'About 8.'

    A. take further   B. gain   C. get back (100%)   D. return

6. – 'Hi, is Jason home?'

    -   'Sorry, he just ___ for a drink with his friends.'

    A. won over   B. included   C. went out (100%)   D. left

7. – 'What's she doing online now?'

    - 'She's trying to ___ where the dinner is.'

    A. discover   B. go back   C. find out (100%)   D. point

8. – 'I was late for my date last night, so I ___ a story about a traffic jam.'

    - 'But did your girlfriend believe it? Better be frank next time.'

    A. invented   B. made up (100%)   C. followed   D. come down

9. – 'It's only a matter of time before they ___ that local supermarket.'

    - 'I think so, too.'

    A. acquire   B. turn out   C. take over (100%)   D. provide

10. – 'Don't you feel warmer today?'

    - 'The heating ___ at 6 this morning.'

    A. looked around   B. came on (100%)   C. started   D. broke

11. – 'How do you get in the pub?'

    - 'Ring me when you're outside and I'll tell you how to ___ .'

    A. enter   B. come in (80%)   C. adopt   D. put up

12. – 'The value of my house has been ___ ever since I bought it.'

    - 'Well, I did warn you at the time.'

    A. going down (100%)   B. putting out   C. reducing   D. moving

13. – 'It's taken me a week to ___ our travel plans.'

    - 'Thanks, darling. I'm sure we'll have a wonderful time.'

    A. develop   B. work out (100%) C. pick out   D. turn

14. – 'Have you got a minute? I want to ___ my plan for the wedding. '

   -   'OK. How exciting!'

   A. set out (85%)   B. put into   C. arrange   D. present

15. – 'Today I told my manager I was ready to ___ more duties if he gave me the chance.'

   - 'What did he say?'

   A. accept   B. go in   C. take on (95%)   D. assume

16. – 'I bet John won't ___ without a fight.'

   -   'You can say that again.'

   A. surrender   B. think about   C. give up (100%)   D. work

17. – 'When the weather is nice I love to ___ early.'

   -   'Me, too. It's good to enjoy the morning air.'

   A. rise   B. release   C. get up (90%)   D. look after

18. – 'Shall I ___ our suitcases?'

   - 'Not there, it's too dirty.'

   A. put down (100%) B. lay   C. bring back   D. grow

19. - 'Oh, no. It's starting to rain.'

   - 'Shall I ___ the washing?'

   A.   get   B. bring in (85%)   C. move up   D. choose

20. – 'We'd better ___ our coats. It's hot inside.'

   - 'Right.'

   A.   remove   B. take off (95%)   C. break up   D. engage

Appendix B: The Questionnaire

This questionnaire will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Thank you for participating.

1.   Name: _____

2.   Sex: _____

3.   Age: _____

4. What is your profession?……………………….

5. Where were you born?…………………

6. What is your level of education (e.g. secondary school, university degree)?…………

If you have attained secondary school, undergraduate and postgraduate courses in different countries, please indicate which countries..............................

7. Do you speak any other language(s) apart from Chinese and English? If yes, indicate which language and the degree (survival, fluent or advanced).
…………………..………….

8. Have you ever lived in other English-speaking countries? If yes, when and how long did you stay?............................

9. How long have you resided in the UK?...................................

10. Do you watch English TV programmes? If yes, how many hours a day?

A. 0-1   B. 1-2   C. 2-3   D. 3-4   E. over 4

11. When you watch TV, do you put on the subtitle? If yes, how often do you put it on?

A. never   B. occasionally   C. sometimes   D. always   E. all

12. Have you taken any English classes? If yes, how long?............................

13. Which language do you speak with whom, for how many hours a day and where (e.g. home, school, work, etc.)? When you talk about topics (i.e. family matters, relationships, work, hobbies etc.), which language do you use for each kind of topic?

People	Language	Hours a day / a week	Mode (through phone / face to face)	Topic
Parents				
Parents-in-law				
Chinese relatives				
British relatives				
children				
partner				
Chinese Friends				
British Friends				
neighbours				
Colleagues				
...				

14. For which activities do you use your language(s), how many hours per day?

Activity	Language(s)	Hours per day
Reading		
Watching TV		

Listening to the radio		
Internet, e-mails		

15.   Describe which language you like to speak the most, whether you feel confident speaking this language and if you think it's important to be good at this language.

Give the level of each language by using the following scale:

I don't like speaking it   1   2   3   4   5   I like speaking

I don't feel confident 1   2   3   4   5   I feel confident

It's not important   1   2   3   4   5   It's important

Language	I like to speak it	I feel confident	I think it is important to be good at
1:			
2:			

16.   I like learning new languages. Indicate how much you like it using the following scale:

Don't like   1   2   3   4   5   Like very much