

The ability of Iraqi university students to recognize and produce phrasal verbs in English from a syntactic and semantic perspective

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The aim of this study is to investigate the ability of Iraqi university students to recognize and produce English phrasal verbs and their synonymous simple lexical verbs from a syntactic and semantic point of view. It is hypothesized those students find it difficult to recognize and produce phrasal verbs. The results show that the students seem to have insufficient skill or capacity to recognize phrasal verbs and consequently to produce meaningful sentences. The data was collected by testing 50 Year-4 students in an English department in an Iraqi university.

Key words: EFL; phrasal verbs; university students; Iraq

Introduction

Phrasal verbs are a cause of concern for teachers of English language in many parts of the world and are considered as a significant factor in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) syllabuses (Cornell, 1985). Phrasal verbs are defined as occurring when a verb comes before a non-verbal particle, identical in shape to a preposition or adverb (Crystal, 2003). They always consist of two parts which are a main verb, such as *take* or *find*, and a prepositional adverb (often called a particle), such as *off*, *out* or *away* (Leech, 2006). Common examples are: *take off*, *carry on* and *find out*. (Conrad, Biber, & Leech, 2002, p. 34) clarify that phrasal verbs are only one of three types of multi-word verbs, the others consisting of prepositional verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs. These multi-word verbs have tenses and can be utilized in questions, negatives and in the passive voice in the same way as other verbs are used (see Table 1 for examples).

Table 1. Examples of the grammar of phrasal verbs (after Foley & Hall, 2003)

| Tense | Example |
|----------------------------|--|
| Future continuous question | Will you be putting the party off? |
| Present perfect passive | The party has been put off until next month |
| Passive voice | That story was made up by a resentful employee |

There are five main types of phrasal verbs (the following summary is based on Wyatt, 2006):

1. Intransitive phrasal verbs
Example: You're driving too fast. You ought to *slow down*.
2. Transitive phrasal verbs
The object has the capacity to occur in one of two positions:
 - a) Between the verb and the particle(s)
Example: I think I'll *put my jacket on*
 - b) After the particle
Example: I think I'll *put on my jacket*.
 However, when the object is a pronoun it is often a must to occur between the verb and the particle
Example: I think I'll *put it on*. Not * I think I'll *put on it*.
3. Transitive phrasal verbs in which the object has to occur between the verb and the particle
Example: Our latest designs *set our company apart* from our rivals.
4. Transitive phrasal verbs in which the object has to follow the particle
Example: John *takes after his mother*.
5. Transitive phrasal verbs which appear to have two objects, one of them follows the verb and the other follows the particle
Example: They *put their success down to good planning*.

Phrasal verbs present particular difficulty to EFL learners because they tend to be idiomatic, indicating that the meaning cannot be deduced by understanding or looking up the verb and the particle separately. For example, it would be impossible to surmise that, among other alternative meanings, *fall through* means *not happen* and *put off* means *postpone* (Thatcher, 2008). Many learners of EFL, even those who display a good knowledge of other aspects of English, tend where possible to avoid using phrasal verbs (Seidl & McMordie, 1988).

The study

Context of the study

The study reported here was conducted in a university in Iraq. The participants were 50 students majoring in English who were randomly selected from the Year-4 programme of the English department. The participants were all approximately 22 years old and consisted of 30 males and 20 females. All participants had similar educational backgrounds having passed through the same educational system and been admitted to university through the same qualifying procedures, and had all had similar exposure to English. As Year-4 students they were all familiar with studying at the tertiary level and had taken broadly similar courses during their university studies. In order to maintain good ethical practice the participants were told about the study and its research purpose and were invited to participate. The data collection was anonymous.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a four-part test. The first two sections (1A and 1B) of the test (Appendix 1) focused on recognition and the latter sections (2A and 2B) on production (Appendix 2). Section 1A used multiple-choice questions to ask participants to choose one from a range of 4 given particles to fill a gap in a sentence. The purpose was to test recognition of the meaning of particles and how they are used with lexical verbs to constitute either phrasal or prepositional verbs. Gap-filling was chosen because Heaton (1975) suggests it is the preferable type for multiple-choice questions within grammatical tests. However, it must be acknowledged that multiple choice items can sometimes result in the selection of the appropriate answer by chance. In Section 1B, participants were given a list of phrasal verbs and asked to fill gaps in sentences with a suitable phrasal verb. Participants were instructed to change the form of the verb if necessary.

Section 2A of the test identified production by providing sentences containing underlined words and an instruction to rewrite them using suitable phrasal verbs with the same meaning. Section 2B asked participants to produce lexical verbs of the same meaning as the phrasal verbs underlined in the questions. They could also change the form of the verbs if necessary.

The purpose of the test was to discover the difficulties Iraqi learners encounter with recognition (Sections 1A and 1B) and production (Sections 2A and 2B) of phrasal verbs. By identifying students' strengths and weaknesses the test is able to diagnose their capacity with phrasal verbs.

Administration of the test

Participants were asked not to write their names on the test paper and to remain relaxed during the test. Explaining to them that the test was for research purposes and conducted anonymously was designed to rid them of tension, fear, and worry. The time allocated for the whole test was 50 minutes.

Validity and reliability of the test

To ensure the reliability and validity of the test it was submitted for examination by a jury of academics specialising in the field of linguistics, methodology and grammar. The jury consisted of eight academics, four members of academic staff of the university in which the research was conducted and four members of academic staff of another university in Iraq. In addition, statistical analysis demonstrates that the reliability coefficient of all the test questions is more than 0.7.

Data analysis and discussion

This section analyses and discusses the data from each of the four sections of the test.

Recognition test

This section reports and discusses the results related to the first sections of the test which evaluate the participants' ability to accurately identify relevant elements of texts.

Section 1A

In section 1A of the test, participants were presented with pairs of sentences. The first sentence was complete and contained a lexical verb, while the second sentence included a space to be filled by choosing one of 4 possible particles (see Appendix 1 for the complete list of test items). The results of Section 1A are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of correct and incorrect responses for questions in Section 1A (Recognition)

| Sentence | Correct % | Incorrect % |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put the meat in the cupboard so that the cat can't reach it. Put the meat in the cupboard so that the cat can't getit (of, for, at, by). | 22 | 78 |
| 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Their new baby definitely resembles her grandmother. Their new baby definitely takes ... her grandmother. (to, after, from, on). | 44 | 56 |
| 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We were completely attested to his apparent honesty. We were completely taken ... by his apparent honesty. (off, up, in, down) | 34 | 66 |
| 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They proved that they are the best. They made that they are the best (up, out, at, for) | 32 | 68 |
| 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> She doesn't stop doing her difficult homework easily. She doesn't give doing her difficult homework easily.(off, up, in, over) | 76 | 24 |

Reliability coefficient = 0.909%

Participants scored least well on sentence 1 with only 22% of them demonstrating an ability to recognize the required particle to construct a phrasal verb with the same meaning as the paired lexical verb. Conversely, 76% of participants successfully selected the appropriate particle in question 5.

Section 1B

In this section of the test, participants were given a list of phrasal verbs and asked to fill the spaces in accompanying sentences. As multi-word verbs have tenses, the students were also required to change the form of the verbs if necessary. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of correct and incorrect responses for questions in Section 1B (Recognition)

| Sentence | | Correct % | Incorrect % |
|----------|---|--------------|----------------|
| 1 | Despite the evidence, the accused man managed to____, much to every one's surprise. | 36 | 64 |
| 2 | Computers are rapidly ____from books as children's learning resources. | 36 | 64 |
| 3 | Don't say too much, or you'll ____the answer without meaning to. | 28 | 72 |
| 4 | You shouldn't ____your credit card details over the Internet. | 14 | 86 |
| 5 | The manager director ____the company's poor performance to high interest rates. | 12 | 88 |

Suggested gap-fillers: get off, give away, give out, keep to, put out, put down, take over

Reliability coefficient = 0.752%

None of the items in this section of the test scored as high as the top scoring item in Section 1A. However, 2 of the 5 items scored lower than the lowest item in Section 1A. This suggests that items in Section 1B caused greater difficulty for the participants than those in Section 1A. Perhaps the items in Section 1B are more difficult because choosing the right answer depends on a clear understanding of the context expressed through the meaning of the whole sentence. This problem is illustrated in the lowest scoring items. For example, sentence 5 of this section required participants to understand the somewhat abstract meaning of the phrasal verb *put down* which is *to attribute the cause of something to something else*. As this is rather distant from the more concrete meaning associated with the physical act of putting something down, it is unlikely that participants would be able to work out this meaning from the minimal context provided.

Production test

This section reports and discusses the results related to the first sections of the test which evaluate the participants' ability to accurately produce relevant elements of texts.

Section 2A

Section 2A of the test focuses on production. It provides participants with sentences which they are asked to rewrite using suitable phrasal verbs to give the exact same meaning as the original sentence. Participants are required to think of phrasal verbs and try to produce them appropriately. The data for this section of the test is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of correct and incorrect responses for questions in Section 2A (Production)

| | Sentence | Correct % | Incorrect % |
|---|--|-----------|-------------|
| 1 | If you don't <u>follow</u> the health and safety regulations, you will be punished. | 60 | 40 |
| 2 | As night fell, the stars <u>appeared</u> . | 74 | 26 |
| 3 | While tidying my room, I <u>found</u> an old diary of mine from 1985. | 82 | 18 |
| 4 | The sun became <u>hidden by</u> a cloud and the temperature fell suddenly. | 36 | 64 |
| 5 | I was very <u>surprised</u> when I was told that I was no longer allowed to park in front of my own house. | 62 | 38 |

Reliability coefficient = 0.905%

Participants scored well on most of the items in this section, scoring between 60% and 82% on all but one item. In some cases this may be because the vocabulary of the sentence is easy to understand and that assists the participants in finding the correct answer. This may be the case with sentence 3, the highest scoring item, which required participants to come up with the phrasal verb *happen upon/on* in relation to finding something or meeting somebody by chance. On the other hand, participants may have been less familiar with the phrasal verb *to go in* and may not have easily associated it with the notion of disappearance of the sun, thus scoring less well in sentence 4.

Section 2B

Section 2B required participants to produce lexical verbs to replace accurately the phrasal verbs underlined in the sentences. They also needed to change the form of the verbs as necessary. The data for this section of the test is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency of correct and incorrect responses for questions in Section 2B (Production)

| | Sentence | Correct % | Incorrect % |
|---|--|-----------|-------------|
| 1 | The plane to Rome was delayed because of fog. What time did it eventually <u>take off</u> the ground ? | 38 | 62 |
| 2 | If you are phoning from outside the country, <u>leave out</u> the first zero in the city code. | 16 | 84 |
| 3 | Jill <u>takes after</u> her Aunt Betsy in appearance. They're both dark-haired and have brown eyes. | 28 | 72 |
| 4 | I don't believe you! You've <u>made up</u> the whole story. | 10 | 90 |
| 5 | Don't <u>put off</u> going to see the dentist if you have toothache. | 24 | 76 |

Reliability coefficient = 0.782 %

This kind of question appears to have been difficult for the participants. The highest scoring item, sentence 1, was answered accurately by only 38% of participants. Other items in this section were significantly lower scoring. The lowest scoring item in the section was also the lowest scoring of the whole test.

Findings

Findings about recognition

Most students were unable to determine whether each particle was an adverb or a preposition. In the multiple-choice items, most students did not recognize whether this particle related to the lexical verb preceding it to form a phrasal verb or to the noun phrase, if one appears in the sentence, which comes after it to constitute a prepositional phrase.

Most students did not display the skill to recognize the meaning of a phrasal verb and this was particularly obvious when they were given incomplete sentences and asked to complete them with a suitable phrasal verb from a given list.

Findings about production

The production sections of the test seem to be more complex than the recognition sections. In production the student must, first of all, recognize the question and then produce the required answer.

The students had considerably more difficulty starting from a sentence containing a phrasal verb and providing its synonymous lexical verb. Most of them performed better when providing a synonymous phrasal verb for a given lexical verb. Perhaps this is because most students know the meanings of the lexical verbs and consequently are more easily able to produce a synonymous phrasal verb.

The phrasal verbs have tenses just like any lexical verbs. When the students were required to change the form of the phrasal verb according to the context of the sentence, most of them failed.

Conclusion and recommendations

Accurate command of phrasal verbs is essential to learners' academic performance, therefore phrasal verbs and their usage must be reinforced through reforms in course design and teaching curricula in a way which includes the meaning, context and translation into the students' first language of common phrasal verbs. Despite the fact that phrasal verbs are commonly used in English, students in the context studied here, and quite likely in many other EFL contexts, hesitate to use them. Therefore, teachers must be persuaded to increase the practise and classroom activities connected to phrasal verbs, thus encouraging students to use them without fear. In schools, the teaching curricula must cover phrasal verbs at an early stage to expose pupils quickly, and early on, to the nature of phrasal verbs and their meaning.

It should be recognised and reinforced that phrasal verbs are not irregular units of verbs and particles and each one of them is governed by a pattern. These patterns should be researched more thoroughly and applied in order to prepare reliable pedagogical materials for English learners.

From a semantic perspective, because it is clear that the meaning of a phrasal verb does not represent the combination of the meanings of its individual parts, students must be encouraged to memorize the meanings of high frequency phrasal verbs just as they would learn vocabulary items.

From a syntactic perspective, it is important to develop a large number of exercises which will give students practice in placing the adverbial particles in their correct positions.

Suggestions for further research

Any further research which enables better understanding of phrasal verbs and how to use and teach them would be useful. Such research may include a broad range of areas concerned with their use in literature and everyday life, as well as how to improve the teaching of phrasal verbs to EFL learners.

About the author

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Appendix 1: The recognition section of the test

Section 1: Recognition

A. For each of the following pairs of sentences, choose the most appropriate word from those in brackets to complete the second sentence according to the context in the first.

1. Put the meat in the cupboard so that the cat can't reach it.
Put the meat in the cupboard so that the cat can't getit (of, for, at, by).
2. Their new baby definitely resembles her grandmother.
Their new baby definitely takes ... her grandmother. (to, after, from, on).
3. We were completely attested to his apparent honesty.
We were completely taken ... by his apparent honesty. (off, up, in, down)
4. They proved that they are the best.
They made that they are the best (up, out, at, for)
5. She doesn't stop doing her difficult homework easily.
She doesn't give doing her difficult homework easily.(off, up, in, over)

B. Complete the sentences below with suitable phrasal verbs from the following list. Change the form of the verbs if necessary. (get off, give away, give out, keep to, put out, put down, take over).

1. Despite the evidence, the accused man managed to, much to every one's surprise.
2. Computers are rapidly from books as children's learning resources.
3. Don't say too much, or you'll the answer without meaning to.
4. You shouldn't your credit card details over the Internet.
5. The manager director the company's poor performance to high interest rates.

Appendix 2: The production section of the test

Section 2: Production

A. Rewrite these sentences using suitable phrasal verbs to give the same meaning as that of the underlined words.

1. If you don't follow the health and safety regulations, you will be punished.
2. As night fell, the stars appeared.
3. While tidying my room, I found an old diary of mine from 1985.
4. The sun became hidden by a cloud and the temperature fell suddenly.

5. I was very surprised when I was told that I was no longer allowed to park in front of my own house.

B. Replace the phrasal verbs underlined with lexical verbs that give the same meaning. Change the form of the verbs if necessary.

1. The plane to Rome was delayed because of fog. What time did it eventually take off the ground ?
2. If you are phoning from outside the country, leave out the first zero in the city code.
3. Jill takes after her Aunt Betsy in appearance. They're both dark-haired and have brown eyes.
4. I don't believe you! You've made up the whole story.
5. Don't put off going to see the dentist if you have toothache.