Phrasal Verbs: A Problem for ESL/EFL Learners and Suggested Solution

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs are very important to comprehend and communicate with native speakers as they are frequency used in writing as well as in speaking. However, it is undeniable that learners may find it difficult to understand and use phrasal verbs and this leads them to avoid using them. This article aims to provide the overview of phrasal verbs as a problem for ESL/EFL learners and discuss the possible solution for learning and teaching phrasal verbs.

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Introduction

As proposed by Cornell (1985), phrasal verbs are notably essential to comprehend and communicate with native speakers since they are commonly used in spoken and informal written language. Fletcher (2005) stresses that phrasal verbs can also be used in all types of text, even in formal texts, when they are the most appropriate way of expressing the idea. However, from the previous research and available literature, it is generally admitted that phrasal verb is one of the problematic areas for ESL/EFL learners and they have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs and prefer to use one-word verbs alternatively. This article, therefore, begins by defining the term "phrasal verb". It then presents learners' difficulties dealing with phrasal verbs. Finally, it discusses some suggested learning and teaching approaches.

What is a phrasal verb?

There has been substantial research and various literature available in the area of phrasal verbs, notably in the field of ESL and EFL. Definition of the term "a phrasal verb" is also debatable among grammarians and researchers. The verb plus particle combination functioning as a single unit is commonly termed as "a phrasal verb". Some linguists call such combination "a multi-word verb" (Schmitt & Siyanova, 2007) and "a verb-particle combination" (Fraser, 1976). In the literature, various definitions of a phrasal verb are also found.

According to a definition provided by Fraser (1976), a verb-particle combination is used to describe "a single constituent or series of constituents, whose semantic interpretation is independent of the formatives which compose it" (p. v). That is, the meaning of a verb-particle combination cannot be decoded by combining the meanings of its verb and particle.

Bolinger (1971) suggests that the phrasal verbs should be considered as "new stereotypes" rather than "new words". He proposes the phrasal verb as "a lexical unit in the strict sense of a non-additive compound or derivation, one that has a set meaning which is not the sum of the meanings of its parts" (p. xii).

In Darwin and Gray's article (1999, p. 65), Phrasal verbs can be defined as all verbs and particle combinations that function as a unit both lexically and syntactically such as "bring about", "take on", and "give up".

Driven (2001) writes, according to a preliminary definition, that phrasal verbs "possess some degree of idiomaticity in the assembly of the verb plus preposition (cry over something), or verb plus separable particle (run up the flag, run the flag up), verb plus inseparable particle (run up a debt), or the double assembly of verb plus particle and preposition (face up to problems)" (p. 39).

For Fletcher and Patrick (2004), a phrasal verb is a particular subset of verb-particle combinations which consist of a single-word verb and a particle, whether preposition or adverb. They further adopt the definition of a phrasal verb as mentioned in Dixon's work (1987) and describe it as "considered to be non-decomposable structures where the meaning is in the whole and not the parts of the phrase" (p. 163).

Schmitt and Siyanova (2007, p. 119) propose that multi-word verbs consist of two or more orthographic words acting as a single lexical unit whose meanings sometimes are quite easy to figure out from its separable parts (e.g. *get back* from a trip = return), while others cannot be virtually predictable (e.g. brush up on your French = revise).

While a variety of definitions of the term "phrasal verb" have been suggested, it is obviously noticed that the phrasal verb is defined in two parts which are syntactic and lexical. Thus, this article will use the definition proposed by Bolinger (1971) who saw the PV as a combination of verb and a particle, which can be either adverb or preposition, functioning together as a new lexical unit.

Phrasal verbs as a problem for ESL/EFL students

A considerable amount of literature has been published on phrasal verbs as a problematic feature for ESL/EFL learners. Conclusively, it has been suggested that not only the nature of phrasal verbs themselves, but also the teaching approaches used to present them to the learners, are the major causes of learners' difficulty in dealing with phrasal verbs.

In *Helping students sort out phrasal verbs*, Blau, Gonzales, and Green (1983, p. 184) posit two categories of student's problems with phrasal verbs: semantic or vocabulary problems and syntactic or word order problems. In their view of the semantic problem, they highlight that students often do not consider the two- or three-word verb as a lexical unit with a special meaning. The claim is more precise when phrasal verbs do not occur in the student's mother tongue. Students also overlook the importance of the particle of the phrasal verbs, especially when a single word in their first language can convey the meaning. Consequently, it is not surprising that they skip the particle or the final component and produce sentences like: * Turn the stove. And * Pick the laundry, instead of: Turn on the stove. And Pick up the laundry (the sentences marked with an asterisk (*) are ungrammatical).

This view is also accepted by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). They mention that phrasal verbs are odd and troublesome for ESL/EFL learners as the existence of phrasal verbs in non-Germanic languages is very rare. As a result, some nonnative speakers often overuse single-word verbs where a phrasal verb is more appropriate. For example, they say, "I arose early this morning." instead of "I got up early this morning" (p. 425). Even though the former is grammatical and meaningful, the latter is more appropriate in spoken discourse.

Moreover, the meaning of many phrasal verbs is not transparent. Therefore, it is not easy, and sometimes impossible, to interpret the meaning of the verb by combining the meaning of each parts i.e. these phrasal verbs are said to be idiomatic, for example, chew out, tune out, catch up, and put off (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Schmitt & Siyanova, 2007; Side, 1990; Wyss, 2002).

In their analysis of the syntactic problem, Blau, Gonzales, and Green (1983) point out that the placement of objects in relation to the particle is able to create confusion to the students i.e. whether certain phrasal verbs are separable or non-separable. Sometimes teachers and textbooks overburden students in mastering phrasal verbs and mislead them that in order to avoid the errors they need to memorize the separable/non-separable property of every English phrasal verb. In addition, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 426) illustrate this point clearly by showing the condition of optional and obligatory separation of the transitive phrasal verb "turn out".

a.   Turn out the lights.

b.   Turn the lights out.

As the direct object is expressed as a noun, as illustrated in a. and b above, placing the noun object after or before the particle is syntactically possible. In other words, when the direct object is a noun, the separation is optional. On the other hand, as shown in c. and d. below, when the direct object is a pronoun, the separation is obligatory and it must necessarily be placed between the verb and particle.

c.   Turn them out.

d.   Turn out them.

Furthermore, phrasal verbs are said to be problematic to ESL/EFL learners as a result of their highly productive capacity (Bolinger, 1971; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Cornell, 1985; Darwin & Gray, 1999; Side, 1990). As Bolinger (1971, p. xiii) states the phrasal verb is "probably the most prolific source" of new words in English.

Superficially, phrasal verbs might seem to be randomly invented from the choice and combination of verbs and particles and thus there are a large number of phrasal verbs which learners need to know. However, Cornell (1985, p. 270) argues that, in general non-idiomatic phrasal verbs can be found in large quantities. Learners can thus deduce the meaning of phrasal verbs if the verb element is known. For instance, if the learner knows the verb *to rush* or *to steam*, s/he can easily understand the meaning of *to rush away* or *to steam off*.

However, again, as Cornell (1985, p. 270) reminds us, dealing with phrasal verbs turns out to be problematic owing to the phenomenon of polysemy. He further describes that a combination of a particular verb and particle may be polysemic in having both an idiomatic and a non-idiomatic use as well as having more than one idiomatic use. Illustrated below, an idiomatic phrasal verb *put up* can be used in different meanings:

He put us up for the night.

Who put you up to this?

He put up a good fight.

Elsewhere, another example of a phrasal verb having more than one meaning is provided by Steele (2005, p. 1). The phrasal verb *turn down* carries the familiar meaning *to decrease the volume* as in "He turned down the radio," but it can be interpreted as *to reject* as in "He turned her down". In addition, to reduce students' confusion, she suggests that teachers should teach the meaning of the verb as it appears saliently in the text, without giving the other possible meanings.

In addition, a further complicated problem may arise from what native speakers of English know unconsciously about phrasal verbs, i.e. they understand the underlying meaning and the use of particles. This allows them to coin novel phrasal verbs and understand phrasal verbs they have never encountered before (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Darwin and Gray, 1999; Marks, 2005). By way of illustration, Side (1990) explains that "If I tell somebody to *bog off*, that person is well aware that what I am saying has nothing to do with bogs and everything to do with beating a retreat" (p. 146). However, such understanding cannot be expected from ESL/EFL learners. Thus, they can be confused when being told to *bog off* (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p. 66).

Suggested Solution

The following suggestions are proposed to help teachers and learners overcome difficulties in the process of learning and teaching phrasal verbs. First, Marks (2006) states that the "focus on the verb" can be applied to promote economical and systematical teaching and learning phrasal verbs. That is, grouping phrasal verbs formed from the same verb is useful as the basic relationship of meaning based on these can be realized. For example, provided below example sentences, learners should be able to find out the basic physical meaning of the verb "put" and it can be memorable.

Television can be a useful way of putting across health messages.

One option is to put back the wedding.

Why can't you put your past behind you?

However, some criticize that this approach can do more harm than good. The lists of the same verbs with different particles can make learners confused because these groups of verbs can help nothing, except providing unrelated meaning (Norman, 2010 as cited in Mart, 2012). As suggested in *Complete Guide to Phrasal Verbs,*the "focus on the particle"is, thus, considered more beneficial. Understanding the logic behind the particle is the key of this approach. To do this, sufficient example sentences need to be presented to make teachers' explanation of the underlying meaning of the particle clear.It is also suggested that if the particle "does perform a more consistent function with regard to its effect on the meaning of the root verb e.g. 'up' adding a sense of completion […] then the approach is clearly more valid." (Gairns & Redman, 1986 as cited in Marks, 2006), for example; the meaning of the particle "up" in the following examples is 'beginning to happen, exist, or appear'

Several problems cropped up just as we were finishing. Marry has just taken up knitting. The two boys cooked up a plan to steal the bike

The above brief discussion reveals that fact that approaching phrasal verbs through the lists focusing on the verb or the particle is still questionable. Another suggestion is that phrasal verbs should be approached in meaningful context. Through this method, "students are able to pick up the meaning of a phrasal verb from its context even though they have never seen it before" (Dainty, 1992 as cited in Mart, 2012). Thornbury (2002) also stresses that phrasal verbs should be presented "in short contexts that demonstrate their syntactic behavior". This approach can be exemplified as in Cirocki's article (Cirocki, 2003) in which he explains how context can help students deal with phrasal verbs. He has students read a text entitled 'Hotel Blaze Escape Drama' in which a few phrasal verbs are presented.

At present it is not known how the fire started. It seems the fire,

broke out in the early hours of the morning. The fire alarm went

off at around 2.00 a.m. It is thought it was *set off* by smoke coming from one of the bedrooms on the first floor. ...

Through this context method, learners can decode the meaning of phrasal verbs and they can be learned naturally.

Conclusion

Phrasal verbs are one of the most difficult areas for learners and teachers alike, especially in an ES/EFL context. Yet, it is a very fruitful feature to help communicate effectively. Therefore, applying appropriate teaching approach need to be considered to reduce learners' frustration and to promote their understanding and their use of phrasal verbs.

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