# A Review on Studies of Phrasal Verb Constructions in ESL Context

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to give an overview of studies on phrasal verbs in three decades to present the theoretical and methodological issues, as well as the findings of research. Moreover, this review reveals the developments and paradigm shifts occurred in this area. Previous studies have shown that the research findings have not been incorporated into classroom activities and English Language Teaching (ELT) materials. The paper claims that the number of research on the use of phrasal verbs in ESL textbooks is limited and, therefore, further research is needed to examine how phrasal verbs are treated in textbooks in order to help ELT materials developers to present these items more effectively based on research findings.

**Keywords:** Corpus-based studies, ESL learner, Phrasal verbs

## 1. Introduction

There has been an interest in corpus analysis and its potentials in teaching (Cotos, 2014) as it is found useful "in virtually all branches of linguistics or language learning" (Leech, 1997, p. 9). Corpus-based approach shows how English grammatical resources are used by learners (Biber, Conard & Reppen, 1994) and during the past few decades there has been a great interest on the corpus analysis of language features, especially phrasal verbs as they are the most complicated feature of language for ESL learners. An English phrasal verb or verb-particle combination (Fraser, 1976) consists of a verb followed by an invariable particle that functions as a single grammatical form (Quirk et al., 1985) or single unit of meaning (Narayanaswamy, 2004). Darwin and Gray (1999) describe it as "a verb + particle combination that functions as a single verb, both parts giving up meaning in order to form a new lexical item" (p. 65).

## 2. Overview of the Literature

To present a clear overview of relevant research on phrasal verb constructions it is decided to split the studies into two main groups: focus on learner performance; and, focus on language materials.

### 2.1 Focus on Learner Performance

Some studies have concentrated on syntactic and semantic analysis of phrasal verb combinations (Lindner, 1981; Sawyer, 1999; Von, 2007) as Lindner's (1981) study focused on 600 verb particle constructions with Out and 1200 with Up to examine semantic structure of verb particle constructions. Framework of Langacker's Space Grammar was employed to see if particles like Out and Up are meaningful in verb particle constructions and, therefore, these kind of constructions are analyzable. This study rejected the claim made by researchers like Fraser (1976) who stated that particles are generally not meaningful and, thus, they should be represented in the lexicon as arbitrary items and unanalyzable idioms (Lindner, 1981). Lindner (1981) found that particles like Out and Up have many meanings and they contribute to the meaning of verb particle constructions.

A majority of studies on phrasal verbs have been concerned with ESL learners at different levels to see how learners avoid using them (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Sjöholm, 1995; Liao & Fukuya, 2002). For instance, Dagut and Laufer (1985) examined the use of phrasal verbs by Hebrew-speaking students of English. They drew on Fraser's (1976) categories such as literal, semantic (completive) and figurative combinations to identify the frequency of phrasal verbs. Fifteen phrasal verbs preferred by native speakers were incorporated in three tests: a multiple choice test, a translation test and a memorization test. All three tests showed that learners prefer to use single-word verbs over phrasal verbs. The phrasal verbs used were mainly literal and the next two were semantic and

figurative combinations in descending order. Dagut and Laufer (1985, p. 78) claimed that "the phrasal verb structures are the peculiarity of Germanic languages" and Hebrew, non-Germanic language, learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs that are absent in their native language because "learners avoid using what they do not properly understand." Therefore, Dagut and Laufer (1985) attributed the ESL learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs to the structural differences.

Some other studies have been concerned with the comparison of ESL learners with native speakers' use of phrasal verbs. For example, McPartland-Fairman (1989) selected 32 native plus 32 non-native advanced learners of English at the City University of New York to focus on the comprehension of phrasal verbs, literal and figurative, by native and non-native speakers of English in relation to the context. Forty phrasal verbs were presented to the learners auditorily. Using a cross-model semantic priming technique, both groups accessed both literal and figurative phrasal verbs in similar ways regardless of context. The study found that problems with comprehension of phrasal verbs do not occur at the level of access, but in a post-access stage of processing.

Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) followed Dagut and Laufer's (1985) study on ESL learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs. However, unlike Dagut and Laufer's (1985), they (1989) focused on learners of English with Germanic language as well as selecting ESL learners at two levels of language proficiency, intermediate and advanced Dutch learners of English. Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) used three tests (multiple choice, translation and memorization) with 15 sentences each to find out preference for phrasal verbs or single-word verbs. They (ibid.) found that Dutch learners of English who are native speaker of Germanic language avoid using phrasal verbs like Hebrew ESL learners with non-Germanic mother tongue; therefore, they (1989) claimed that the avoidance is not due to structural absence in L1, but due to semantic complexity.

Martin (1990) analyzed phrasal verbs in relation to its textual density, combining elements, syntactic and semantic properties. Martin (1990) used six British corpora including informal letters between family and friends of similar socio-economic from each century (15th to 20th) plus three American corpora for the 18th to the 20th centuries to look at the development of the form of phrasal verbs from the 15th century to the 20th century in British and American English. All words were counted and the ratio of the number of phrasal verbs to overall number of words was considered for finding phrasal verb density. Then, to investigate the combining elements, types and tokens of verbs and particles were considered; average number and frequency of individual verbs as well as verb particles were calculated to examine the semantic functions of phrasal verbs. The study drew on three semantic categories (Quirk et al., 1985): free combinations, semi-idiomatic constructions, and idiomatic constructions. Four dimensions of the form were explored: (1) the density of the form in a text; (2) the character and stability of the combining elements of the form; (3) the syntactic context in which it occurs; and, (4) its semantic types. Therefore, the study indicated that (1) phrasal verbs are as five times as dense in the contemporary texts as in the texts found in 15th century; (2) combination of elements with higher frequency tends to be monosyllabic and superordinate; (3) the range of syntactic possibilities is narrowing and abstract meanings occur overtime; (4) differences between American and English is qualitative than quantitative; and (5) syntactic and semantic properties of phrasal verbs are becoming more complex, context-bound and abstract.

Another study on avoidance of phrasal verbs has been carried out by Laufer and Eliasson (1993); however, they focused on advanced Swedish ESL learners. They administered a multiple-choice test and a translation test and found that avoidance is due to L1-L2 differences.

Motivating by Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), Sjöholm (1995) looked at the type of L1 influence in the acquisition of phrasal verbs by Finnish and Swedish intermediate and advanced English learners. He administered a multiple-choice test in which each item had two correct alternatives: a phrasal verb and a synonymous one-word verb. Then, learners were asked to choose the best answer fitted the context. By means of a questionnaire, Sjöholm (1995) tried to find out the effect of input the learners had received in a context-embedded situation on the use of phrasal verbs. Findings showed that both structural and semantic L1-L2 differences can impede the acquisition of phrasal verbs.

Some studies have been investigated the type of phrasal verbs and their relationship with learners' language proficiency (Chu, 1996; Liao & Fukuya, 2002). For example, Chu (1996) examined 274 students in Taiwan from junior high school to college in order to compare literal and non-literal meaning of English phrasal verbs and examine students' errors. Using contrastive analysis and error analysis, the study found that students do not use VPs consistently and literal phrasal verbs are easier than figurative ones. The results revealed that students' errors are related to the confusing structures of VPs and more advanced students comprehend and produce VPs better than less advanced students.

Similarly, in Sawyer's (1999) study, the comparison was made on intransitive, split and non-split forms of verb-adverb constructions and verb-particle constructions. The study selected transcripts from CHILDS database; four longitudinal case studies for younger children and cross-sectional data for older children. Findings showed that children treat VACs and VPCs differently. It was found that VACs are used more frequently and VAC errors are syntactic while VPC errors are lexical.

Another study on avoidance of phrasal verbs has been done by Liao and Fukuya (2002) in relation to learners' proficiency and test effect and type of phrasal verbs. They examined avoidance of phrasal verbs among Chinese intermediate and advanced learners in relation to their proficiency level and test effect. Following Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), and Laufer and Eliasson (1993), they (2002) administered three tests such as multiple choice, translation and recall in relation to literal and figurative phrasal verbs. Liao and Fukuya (2002) found

that intermediate learners use fewer phrasal verbs than advanced learners. Learners at the intermediate level avoid using phrasal verbs due to absence of structural feature in their own language. They (ibid.) concluded that avoidance of phrasal verbs by ESL learners is related to the level of language proficiency, type of phrasal verb constructions and type of test administered.

Von (2007) used International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) to study the use of phrasal verbs in German and Italian advanced English learner corpora. Von (2007) concentrated on descriptive analysis of semantic and syntactic aspects of phrasal verbs in terms of quantitative and qualitative manner. He extracted all the phrasal verbs in the corpora and followed Granger's (1996) "Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis" (CIA) to compare them with those in Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). Wordlist and Concord from WordSmith (Scott, 1998) were used as the instruments of the study. The results showed differences and similarities between the two groups which some of them are as follow: German students used more phrasal verbs than native speakers, while Italian students used lower number of phrasal verbs than native speakers; native language influence was more prominent in German students; however, collocation deviations, the inappropriate choice and the simplifying use of phrasal verbs were the features of both German and Italian students.

Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) studied native speakers and advanced nonnative speakers with non-Germanic languages such as Arabic, Italian and Russian. They examined the use of multi-word verbs vs. one-word verbs. A questionnaire of 26 phrasal verbs and their equivalent one-word verbs was given to participants in various setting such as classrooms, campus of the University of Nottingham and via e-mail. They used CANCODE (native spoken) and BNC (native written) as the reference to carry a frequency analysis of the verb pairs. They found that nonnative speakers' use of multi-word verbs is less frequent in informal spoken contexts and one-word verbs are frequently used in both written and spoken discourse.

Trebits (2009) examined the use of phrasal verbs in the Corpus of EU English (CEUE) including 200,000 words by using frequency and concordance analyses. Lexical frequency and Range computer programs by Heatley et al. (2002) were used to identify the frequency list of the EU corpus. Besides, he used WordNet (Miller, 2003) to compare the frequency list to the most frequent phrasal verbs in the BNC based on Leech et al. (2001). WordSmith computer software (Scott, 1996) version 2, concordance function, was used to find the most frequent list of phrasal verbs and to cross-examine the frequency lists produced by lexical frequency program. Trebits (2009, p. 470) found that "the top 25 phrasal verbs account for more than 60% of all phrasal verb constructions in the corpus." Moreover, some similarities between the EU corpus and written academic English were found.

Some studies have been done on ESL learner corpus to compare the frequency of phrasal verbs used by ESL learners with of those in real use of language (Mahmood, 2009; Akbari, 2009; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014). For example, Mahmood (2009) examined phrasal verbs and other items such as nouns, verbs, adverbs and so on in a corpus of Pakistani written English (PWE) and compared it with BROWN, FROWN, BLOB and FLOB corpora. Data were POS tagged with CLAWS 7 tagger which then processed through WordSmith software program. Most frequent items were selected and compared with 300 most frequent items in English and American corpora. The study found that out of 300 items, 208 items were similar in all corpora and 92 items were unique in PWE. The most productive particle in all corpora was "out" and the second and third productive particles were "up" and "in" respectively. Moreover, the least productive particles were "under", "round" and "about".

Another research on ESL learner corpus has been carried out by Akbari (2009). He utilized the EMAS corpus, the English Language of Malaysian School Students, to analyze the writing of students Forms 1 and 4. Akbari (2009) used Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman's (1999) classification of phrasal verbs (i.e., literal, aspectual and idiomatic) and used qualitative approach as well as descriptive statistics by using MonoConc Pro 2.2 (Barlow, 2003) to find distribution and types of phrasal verbs as well as errors and avoidance of these structures. The study revealed that the use of phrasal verbs was more frequent by the students at the higher level. Both groups used less idiomatic phrasal verbs. The students at the lower level, Form 1, used more avoidance behavior than Form 4 students which indicated that the proficiency level has an effect on avoiding phrasal verbs.

Houshyar and Talebinezhad (2012) examined the use of phrasal verbs by advanced and intermediate EFL students and their relationship with their level of language proficiency. Quick Placement Test, version 1, was administered to identify the proficiency level of students. Following Liao and Fukuya (2004) they used multiple-choice test and translation test including 15 items with the focus on 11 literal and 4 figurative phrasal verb types. For statistical tests, they used an alpha level of 0.05 and converted the raw scores into ratios. The study showed that both intermediate and advanced learners of English tend to avoid using phrasal verbs; however, the intermediate learners' use of phrasal verbs is less frequent than advanced ones. Besides, the study found that there is no relationship between test type and avoidance of phrasal verbs. Houshyar and Talebinezhad (2012) claimed that avoidance principle is due to semantic complexity as learners use more literal phrasal verbs than figurative ones.

Another study (Karina, 2013) was concerned with a qualitative approach to examine the learning and teaching of phrasal verbs in advanced language course for BA students at the School of Languages of the University of Veracruz. Karina (2013) interviewed two teachers and designed an open-ended questionnaire for four students from two advanced English classes to find their points of view about teaching and learning phrasal verbs. The study indicated that teachers and students have similar opinions about phrasal verbs. In students' point of view phrasal verbs are significant and if they learn phrasal verbs they would sound more like a native speaker; however, they do not practice learning them. In

teachers' point of view, phrasal verbs are important, but difficult to learn because they do not exist in their mother tongue.

Kamarudin (2013) conducted survey and corpus analyses of phrasal verbs in the corpus of English language of Malaysian Students (EMAS) and used the Bank of English corpus as a reference corpus. Secondary school students and English language teachers in 8 schools were selected for conducting a survey. She focused on learners' understanding of phrasal verbs and teachers' perceptions of vocabulary teaching as well as the treatment of phrasal verbs in Malaysian reference materials. Moreover, the study concentrated on patterns of phrasal verbs and possible factors to the production of them. Using CLAWS tagger, she conducted POS tagging to extract phrasal verbs which then were transferred to WordSmith software for further analysis. A test of phrasal verb for learners and a questionnaire for the teachers were administered. For statistical analysis, test scores were converted into Excel sheet and then transferred to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). She calculated the students mean score and used t-test to identify students' level of understanding and differences among them. ANOVA and post-hoc test were used to examine the differences of understanding phrasal verbs at the three different proficiency levels, low, average, and high. The study found that Malaysian school students' understanding of phrasal verbs is at an average level.

Similarly, Zarifi and Mukundan (2014) conducted a corpus-based content analysis of the EMAS corpus; however, they focused on Form Five Primary Level students to find the creativity and unnaturalness in the use of phrasal verbs. WordSmith Tools version 4.0 was used to extract the phrasal verbs which then were tagged and lemmatized to collect all the inflectional forms of them. With the help of dictionaries, they tried to judge for acceptability of phrasal verbs. They also checked those items without a dictionary entry against the BNC. Zarifi and Mukundan (2014) found that although Malaysian learners tend to use phrasal verbs, they often use and create unusual forms of idiomatic phrasal verbs. They suggested that material developers and teachers should provide students with materials and activities that enable them to produce phrasal verbs, especially idiomatic ones more effectively.

Choorit and Supakorn (2014) examined the use of three phrasal verbs: carry out, find out and point out in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) by Davies. Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OLAD) (2010) was also used as the reference for the information. They used the search feature of the COCA to retrieve 500 concordance lines for each phrasal verb. Concordance lines were stored in Excel spreadsheet in alphabetical order. They looked at grammatical patterns and collocations of each phrasal verb. Choorit and Supakorn (2014) found that most of the major grammatical patterns are included in OLAD; however, "this kind of reference does not provide a comprehensive list of all grammatical patterns and collocates of any particular words" (p. 87). They concluded that instead of relying on tuition and dictionaries, teachers can use corpus-based data to give authentic examples to language learners.

*2.2 Focus on Language Materials*

A development in the study of phrasal verbs is the research carried out by Koprowski (2005) who concentrated on the representation of phrasal verbs in general English course books rather than use of these structures by ESL learners. Koprowski (2005) investigated the usefulness of phrasal verbs and other multi-word items in three contemporary course books: *New Headway Upper-Intermediate* (Soars& Soars, 1998); *Innovations* (Dellar & Hocking, 2000); and, *Inside Out Intermediate* (Kay & Jones, 2000). He used corpus frequency and range data as the criteria for usefulness and COBUILD Bank of English was also used to establish frequency data. Then, a frequency score was assigned to every lexical item in the course books and frequency data for 5 sub-corpora in which the particular item mostly occurred was collected. The results indicated that there were no standardized criteria for choosing multi-word items and the large percentage of selected multi-word items had low frequency and range values. Moreover, the study claimed that selection of items was subjective and ELT materials developers selected the items based on their intuition which indicates that course books have limited pedagogical values to the second language learners.

A study with new perspective has been found in which the researcher (Lee, 2012) was concerned with the instruction of phrasal verbs in classrooms. Lee (2012) drew on cognitive linguistics-inspired instruction of English phrasal verbs to look at phrasal verbs with particles Up, Out and Over produced by 32 intermediate graduate students enrolled for the course of international teaching assistances at the Pennsylvania State University. Gal'perin's theory of Concept-Based Instruction (CBI) was used, and based on Vygotskyan pedagogical theory lessons on phrasal verbs were designed. Lee (2012) developed the Schemas for the Orienting Basis of Action (SCOBAs) to accompany the metaphorical aspects of phrasal verbs. Participants' performances were analyzed in quantitative and qualitative terms. The quantitative data included multiple-choice tests (pretest and posttest) that aimed to find the capability of students in choosing the appropriate phrasal verbs. The qualitative data were collected from a questionnaire, interviews, assignments, classroom recordings and so on. The findings showed that concept-based instruction enhanced systematic understanding of phrasal verbs for the majority of students and their explanations were improved and become semantically rich. Moreover, SCOBAs were useful for understanding the use of phrasal verbs. Lee (2012) suggested that properly organized instruction of phrasal verbs can help learners understand those items more efficiently. Furthermore, he claimed that there is a need to meaning-oriented grammar instruction that enables learners to understand the semantic features of phrasal verbs.

A recent study on phrasal verb has shifted toward its use in ESL textbooks prescribed in schools rather than general English course books. Zarifi (2012) examined the presentation of phrasal verb constructions in relation to research findings in textbooks for Malaysian ESL learners at the Secondary Level (Forms 1-5). He developed the Zar-Test of Initialization which can be applied in three stages to identify the various types of phrasal verbs. Moreover, he offered Focus Framework and Cognitive Load for the evaluation of the use of phrasal verb constructions. He used WordSmith

version 4.0 and the Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs as the instruments to analyze the corpus both quantitatively and qualitatively. BNC was also used as a reference corpus. The study found that the selection and presentation of phrasal verbs are based on authors' intuition rather than on research findings and pedagogical principles.

Another study that focuses on ELT material is McAleese's (2013) research which investigated multi-word items in a contemporary ELT course book, *English Firsthand 1, 4th Edition* (Helgesen, Brown, & Wiltshier, 2010), used for EGP (English for General Purposes) courses in Japan. Multi-word items were identified from the vocabulary lists in the course book appendix. He used a large-scale corpus i.e., Bank of English, to determine the frequency and range of multi-word items. According to the methodology developed by Koprowski (2005), corpus frequency and range data were used to compare and rank multi-word items. McAleese (2013) found that a large proportion of multi-word items appeared in the course book "may be unrepresentative of authentic language and therefore have limited value to the learners" (p. 321).

To sum up, the review of literature has shown that phrasal verbs have been studied extensively to find out how ESL learners use these complicated items and more recently studies focused on the use of phrasal verbs in learner corpora. According to the literature, ESL learners have difficulties in using phrasal verbs, though, advanced learners perform better. It is also revealed that English proficiency level has an effect on utilizing phrasal verb combinations. The majority of studies are concerned with showing the weaknesses of learners in using these structures; however, few studies have focused on how these weaknesses might be due to the presentation of phrasal verbs in ELT materials.

## 3. Conclusion

Previous studies on phrasal verbs mainly fall into four different groups: analysis of syntactic and semantic properties of phrasal verbs (Lindner, 1981; Sawyer, 1999; Von, 2007); comparative analysis of non-native learners on avoidance of phrasal verbs (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Sjöholm, 1995; Liao & Fukuya, 2002); analysis of ESL learner corpora and its comparison with native learner corpora (Mahmood, 2009; Akbari, 2009; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014); and, corpus-based analysis of phrasal verbs in language teaching materials (Koprowski, 2005; Zarifi, 2012; McAleese, 2013). From the perspective of samples and data of the studies on phrasal verbs, the focus of research can be grouped as the focus on participants, utilizing learner corpora, and using general English language course books and ESL textbooks. Methodological shift has occurred from obtaining data from a small number of participants to eliciting data from a large number of participants. Then, studies have focused on learners' corpora to find language patterns. Another development that has happened is the focus on language materials (Koprowski, 2005; Zarifi, 2012; McAleese, 2013) and considering textbooks as a corpus and testing the textbooks against the real use of language (Zarifi, 2012); however, limited number of research has been done in this area. Therefore, it is needed to concentrate on the use of phrasal verbs in the English textbooks to give a more comprehensive account of phrasal verb constructions in textbooks and help materials developers to provide ESL learners with adequate phrasal verb constructions needed to gain the mastery of them.

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