



2025; 21(3):77-88

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Omdurman Islamic University Journal for Human  
Sciences (OIUJ)-(HUSC)

مجلة جامعة أم درمان الإسلامية للعلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية

<https://journal.oiu.edu.sd/index.php/oij>

<https://doi.org/10.52981/oijhs.v21i3.3421>



ISSN: 5361-1858

## Significance of English Phrasal Verbs for Non-native Speakers of English Language

Abdal Majid Mohamed Adam Yousif <sup>1</sup>, Dr Muntasir Hassan Mubarak Alhafian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language/ College of Education at Sudan University of Science and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language/ College of Education at Sudan University of Science and Technology

Email: [majidarafa@yahoo.com](mailto:majidarafa@yahoo.com)<sup>1</sup> , [munmubarak73@gmail.com](mailto:munmubarak73@gmail.com) <sup>2</sup>

To cite this article:

Abdal Majid Mohamed Adam Yousif, Dr Muntasir Hassan Mubarak Significance of English Phrasal Verbs for Non-native Speakers of English Language, Omdurman Islamic University Journal, Sudan

ISSN: 5361-1858

<https://doi.org/10.52981/oijhs.v21i3.3421>

### Abstract:

This research paper explores the significance of English phrasal verbs (EVPs) for non-native speakers of the English language. It aims to answer the question of why non-native speakers must learn and use phrasal verbs (PVs). To collect data for the study and achieve the article's aim, the research adopts an analytical descriptive approach and uses scholarly sources written by academics, experts, and researchers on the challenges and strategies of learning and using PVs among the EFL/ESL learners. The findings show that the non-native speakers' lack of awareness for the importance of VPs is one of the major challenges hindering their learning. Based on the findings, the study recommends that EFL/ESL environments and materials should incorporate, clarify, and emphasize the significance of VPs at early stages of learning and raise students' awareness of their importance for natural and effective communication. It

also recommends that EFL/ESL teachers should fully acquaint themselves with the importance of PVs so that they can assist their students to learn and use them appropriately.

**Keywords:** Phrasal Verb, Particle, Non-native Speakers, EFL, ESL,

## **1. Introduction**

English language has become a widespread international language since early 1980s because of its worldwide significance. English is very important to everyone in today's world. It is the formal means of communication in several different parts of the world, and it is the language of modern technology and the internet. For many people, learning English is a way to get access to a wide range of information, connections, and opportunities. Due to its importance, the number of English speakers around the globe has been increasing and English has been remaining globally dominant language of international communication. (Miqdad, 2011, p. 1). As English is the world's most widely spoken language, it is undoubtedly critical to state that mastering English and achieving effective communication by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) or a second language (ESL) is very important, which necessitates mastering many language skills, the most necessary of which is understanding and using EPVs effectively.

## **2. Definition and Nature of Phrasal Verb**

A phrasal verb (VP), in its broadest sense, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Sangoor (2012), is a form of verb in English that functions as more like a phrase than a single word. It is a construction made of an English lexical verb and a particle (a preposition or an adverb) and sometimes the two together to create new concepts and new word category functioning as a single-word verb, the meaning of which is different from the meaning of its separate parts. A particle is a word used to denote the second component(s) of the PVs. It is "an adverb or a preposition that can combine with a main verb to make a phrasal verb" (Hornby, 2000, p. 961). According to Quirk, et al. (1985), particles can be prepositions only such as against, among, as, at, beside, for, from, into, to, of, in, on, onto, upon, with etc.; or adverbs only like aback, ahead, apart, aside, around, away, back, together etc., or can be either prepositions or adverbs such as about, across, above, after, along, around, down, in, off, on, round, forward, under, up and so on.

Phrasal verbs have long been the subject of a lengthy academic debate among researchers in such domain as grammar, linguistics, pedagogy, and lexicography. Consequently, numerous terms have been used to label this language form such as idiomatic multi-word verbs (Gardy, 1970), Separate-part verbs (Turton & Manser, 1985), verb-particle-constructions, compound verbs, merged verbs, group-verb, separable verb (Nation, 1990), verb phrase (McArthur, 1992), poly-word verbs, separable compound, verb-adverb combinations, two-part verbs, three-part verbs, two-word verbs, three-word verbs, multi-word verbs”, (Bibber et al., 1999) and phrasal verbs (Celce-Murcia & Laresen-Freeman, 1999), (Hemmens, 2007), (Foley & Hall, 2008), (Garins & Redman, 2011), (Olteanu, 2012), (Folse, 2015), (Errey, 2017), (Gray, 2014), (Collins, 2016), (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2017), (Thomas, 2017), and (Mordaunt & McGuire, 2020). According to Spears (1993), despite the several names used for the co-occurrence of a verb with a particle(s), the term “phrasal verbs” gained popularity and has proven to be a winning term because it appears frequently in English literature and linguistic works and is the most familiar term for language learners and teachers.

### **3. Historical Background to English Phrasal verbs**

PVs have existed throughout the history of the English Language. However, their use increased extensively in early modern English. Williams Shakespeare made considerable use of them in his works, with 5744 PVs have been identified within the body of the plays. PVs were widely employed in early modern English dramatic texts due to their “variable shades of meaning and productive capacity” and their propensity to be developed into new idioms. In early modern English, “PVs occur more frequently in letters and dramas than essays or academic writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century”. They have varied in productivity over the centuries, but their number and use have been increasing since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the last fifty years. This development has been most notable in American English. (Hiltuten, 1999, p. 95).

According to McArthur (1989), Samuel Johnson, in his Dictionary of the English Language in 1755, was the first to describe PVs, calling them a “composition.” McArthur points out that at that time, Johnson had no name for the phenomenon because there was no academic name for it and makes the point that by “composition” Johnson meant “compound,” which is widely

used nowadays in labeling the co-occurrence of verbs with particles. The term "phrasal verbs" was first used in print in 1925 by Logan Pearsall Smith in his essay *English Idioms* (p. 36).

#### **4. Empirical Studies on Significance of English Phrasal Verbs**

Several empirical studies on the challenges and strategies of learning PVs among EFL/ESL learners and studies conducted on the significance of phrasal verbs for EFL/ESL learners, such as the studies of Alwarikat and Yunus (2022), Azmar (2019), Abdulla and Khalaf (2018), Shareef (2018) Vasbieva (2015), Thyab (2013) and Abdulla (2010), found out that lack of knowledge about the EPVs in general and the lack of knowledge about the PVs' significance for non-native speakers most specifically, are one of the underlying causes of their learning difficulties. Without sound knowledge of their importance, not only some EFL/ESL students, but also some teachers may not take the matter into serious concern. Therefore, the necessity of EPVs for non-native speakers must be investigated and explained.

#### **5. Significance of Phrasal Verbs for Non-native Speakers of English**

PVs are a key part of everyday English. Their increase in number and their extensive use is a notable phenomenon of today's English. Gardner and Davies (2007) assert that PVs are "very common and highly productive in the English language as a whole" (p. 340), with a small percentage of them making up more than half of the PVs in the whole language. They also estimate that, on average, learners will come across one PV construction in every one hundred fifty words of English they are exposed to." And that ratio simply increases with "conversational genres and registers." (p. 347). PVs are found in different formal and informal contexts, in academic or scientific settings, business, economics, law, movies, and songs such as "*Get Up, Stand Up*" by Bob Marley and movie titles like "*The Empire Strikes Back*", and they are also frequent in journalism such as newspapers and television shows and headlines such as "Country's misplaced pride *holds back* its democracy" and "Cover-up raises fear over bird flu" (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017, p. 6). Darwin and Gray (1999) point out that PVs are used in all registers, from comic books and street slang to the most academic form of language. They appear in a variety of writing styles, including formal government reports (e.g. 8 Iraqis were killed and 23 wounded when fresh clashes broke out between US forces and the militia). (p. 66).

PVs, according to Greenbaum (1996) and Hulstijn & Marchena (1989), are semantically crucial because they carry meaning subtleties. They are a hallmark of excellent idiomatic English and have been proven to be more expressive and capable of conveying explicit and more nuanced meanings than their general one-word counterparts. For instance, if we compare the meaning of the verb ‘to meet’ with the PV ‘to run across,’ ‘to explain’ with ‘to spell out,’ ‘to pay’ with ‘to pay back,’ ‘to cry’ with ‘cry out’ and ‘cry out for’, we find that the PV ‘run across’ suggests that the meeting happens unexpectedly, which is different from the verb ‘meet.’ The meaning of the PVs ‘spell out’ is like the verb ‘explain,’ but the PV emphasizes that the explanation happens thoroughly and in detail. The PV ‘pay back’ (e.g., they will pay her back next Tuesday) carries a literal meaning of returning the borrowed money. It also carries a figurative meaning of punishing or making someone suffer because s/he has done something unpleasant (e.g., we will pay her back for making us look like children in front of everyone). The two meanings are different from that of the verb ‘pay’. The PV ‘cry out’ carries the meanings of speaking in a loud voice or saying something loudly from a distance. It also carries the meaning of making aloud, inarticulate sound as an expression of surprise, fear, pain, grief, and so on, which is different from the meaning of the verb ‘cry.’ The three-word PV ‘cry out for’, on the other hand, carries a meaning which is extremely different from the meanings of cry and cry out. It carries an idiomatic meaning suggesting a need or requirement for something very much (e.g. after years of war, Sudanese people are crying out for lasting peace). Therefore, the PVs run across, spell out, pay back, cry out, and cry out for are more expressive than their single word verbs ‘meet, explain, pay, and cry, because they carry shades of meanings without necessarily having to add any extra adjectives or adverbs.

Furthermore, a simple verb can acquire intensity and specification only by adding a particle. For example, a variety of meanings can be obtained by adding the particle “down” to several verbs. Apart from purely spatial meaning (e.g., carry the suitcase down), the particle “down” can adopt the meaning of decrease in volume, size, or importance, as in (turn down the radio and play down the problems). It can also adopt the meaning of beating someone in a debate, discussion, or argument or defeating them in war or fighting as in ‘I argued down that man yesterday.’ ‘The heavy shelling finally beat down the enemy,’ and it can also signify ‘bring to stop’ (e.g., hunt down an animal and bring down a plane,), reducing to smaller parts’ (break

down the figures, take down the engine), or ‘secure, control’ (calm down). (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 280). In a similar way, different particles can be added to a certain verb to create various distinct meanings. For instance, adding the particles “after,” “for,” “of,” “off,” “up,” and “out” to the main verb “make” can have some of the following meanings as shown in the sentences below.

- The police *made after* the stolen Prado (chased).
- They *made for* home when we arrived (moved toward home).
- I do not know what to *make of* his behavior (understand, find a reason).
- Three thieves broke into the house and *made off* with the money (stole, hurried, and escaped away). (McCarthy & Felicity, 2007, pp. 10-90).
- I am not good at *making up* stories (inventing).
- Juliet always *makes up* lies about her friends (says or writes something that is not true to deceive).
- I cannot *make out* Silly’s handwriting without glasses. (unable to read).
- She did not make out what the customer was saying. (understand). (Errey, 2007, p. 86).

Thus, by means of PVs, the greatest variety of human actions, concepts, ideas, relations, and emotions can be accurately and easily expressed, a thing that demonstrates the semantic significance of EPVs. As noted earlier, most PVs are metaphorical in meaning; recent studies have demonstrated that “metaphoric intelligence” has an important role to play in all areas of communicative competence and can contribute to language learning success. (Littlemore, 2006, p. 20).

PVs are the most dynamic group of English verb lexicon. New combinations are constantly being formed, and they become a fertile field for new coinages. Bolinger (1971) states that “PVs are the most productive source of new lexical items in the English language” (p. 85). In English, nouns are often created from verbs, e.g., invite/invitation, inform/information, resist/resistance, decide/decision, etc. In the same way, it is sometimes possible to form a noun from a PV, that is, transform a PV into a noun by writing it as a single word or hyphenating the words together. (McCarthy & Felicity, 2007, p. 12). PVs have been the source of most new phrasal nouns and phrasal adjectives in English. According to McCarthy & O’Dell

(2017), a phrasal noun is “a noun consisting of a verb combined with a particle, and the particle may come before or after the verb.” (p. 10). Here are some examples of some nouns formed from PVs:

<b>Main Verb +particle</b>	<b>Phrasal Nouns and their Meanings</b>
Back + up	back-up (support).
Break + out	outbreak (sudden start of something such as disease, war, etc.)
Fall + down	downfall (sudden failure or end).
Let + down	letdown (disappointment).
Look + on	onlooker (someone who watches an event).
Come + out	outcome (result)
Stand + by	standby (ready to be used if necessary).

McCarthy and O’Dell (2017) and McCarthy and Felicity (2004) explain that some PVs have related adjectives in English. These adjectives are called phrasal adjectives. They are derived from PVs. Below are some examples.

<b>Main Verb + Particle</b>	<b>Phrasal Adjectives and their Meanings</b>
Break + down	broken-down (stopped working).
Cast + down	downcast (sad and depressed).
Go + on	ongoing (one which continuous).
Put + off	off-putting (makes you not like or want it).
Water + down	watered-down (make less strong).
Wear + out	worn-out (weak, damaged through much use). (pp. 10 -12) & (p. 12).

Learning PVs helps non-native speakers to enrich their vocabulary, which in turn assists them to express their thoughts and ideas more clearly and communicate effectively. Students’ knowledge of PVs relates directly to their comprehension. McCarthy (2003) reveals that no matter how well the students learn the grammar of a language, or no matter how well the

sounds of the second or foreign language are studied, communication cannot occur in a meaningful way without the vocabulary to comprehend and express a wide range of ideas, concepts, and actions, and PVs are essential in helping ESL and EFL learners to do so.

PVs are very useful in the quest to reach fluency in the English language. Ayadi (2010) states that mastering them is necessary for both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills. Using PVs effectively will make the non-native speakers' English more fluent, engaging, and more native-like. PVs mark the difference between average and advanced speakers of English whose language sounds more natural. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) emphasize that PVs are crucial constructions for language learners who wish to become proficient in spoken and written English. They are significant constructions for native-like discourse. According to Cornell (1985), the primary difference between the writing and speech of proficient foreign learners and Englishmen is that Englishmen employ these expressions (PVs) a lot, whereas most non-native speakers are afraid of them, avoid them, and end up sounding stilted as a result. The best approach for EFL and ESL learners who ache for being "flattered" on their English is to be familiar with the frequently used PVs, their meanings, how they are used in different contexts in real-life usage and use them effectively in their communication. (p. 269).

Furthermore, PV's questions are a common focus of many competitive English language proficiency tests. For example, the international standardized English language proficiency tests for non-native English speakers, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System), include PV questions on their tests. The test takers' ability to comprehend and use PVs effectively and naturally in these assessments reflects their overall command and mastery of the language and indicates their English language proficiency levels. Including PV's questions in such assessments demonstrates their significance in effective communication. As a result, having a solid understanding of and ability to use PV appropriately not only assists non-native speakers to perform well in these assessments but also to communicate effectively.

## 6. Methodology

To achieve the study's objective, the research employed an analytical descriptive approach and collected the data by using scholarly sources written by academics and experts on EVPs, namely, scholarly books, journal articles, conference proceedings (papers presented at academic conferences and seminars), theses, and dissertations on the importance of VPs and the challenges of learning and using them, which were conducted in different EFL and ESL contexts by doctoral and master's students.

## 7. Conclusion

The study explored the significance of PVs and their necessity for non-native speakers of the English language. One of the major factors behind the difficulties of learning and appropriate use of EPVs is the non-native speakers' ignorance and lack of awareness of the significance of VPs for natural and vital communication. The study recommended that EFL and ESL teachers should explain and emphasize to their students the importance of PVs in the English language. EFL/ESL environments and materials should clarify the significance of VPs at early stages of learning and raise students' awareness of their importance in natural, rich, and effective communication. It is also recommended that teachers should fully acquaint themselves with their importance so that they can assist their students to learn and use them appropriately. Raising awareness of the significance of VPs is a prerequisite for their better learning, using, and mastering them.

## References

1. Abdulla, E. H. and Khalaf, L. H (2018). Problems Posed by Phrasal Verbs to Undergraduate Students. *International Journal of English Research*, 4(1) 18-22, [www.englishjourn.als.com](http://www.englishjourn.als.com)
2. Ayadi, A. (2010). Lexical Translation Problems: The Problem of Translating Phrasal Verbs. (Unpublished Masters' Thesis). Algeria: Mentouri University.
3. Azmar, C. (2019). Analyzing EFL Learners' Difficulty in Understanding Phrasal Verbs. (Unpublished Masters' Thesis) <https://repository.ar-raniry.ac.id/id/eprint/8608/1/new%20skripsi%20fix%20!.pdf>
4. Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E., (1999). Longman grammar of spoken and written English. Longman: Harlow.
5. Bolinger, D. (1971). *The phrasal verb in English*. Cambridge and Massachusetts.

6. Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1992). *The grammar book*. Heinle & Heinle.
7. Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Heinle.
8. Collins, S. (2016). *Practical everyday English: Advanced vocabulary phrasal Verbs, idioms and expressions*. Oxford University Press.
9. Darwin, C. M., & Gray, L. S. (1999). Going After the Phrasal Verb: An Alternative Approach to Classification. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 65-83.
10. Errey, M. (2007). *1000 phrasal verbs in context: A self-study guide for intermediate to advanced students*. Teflgames.com. [http://www.teflgames.com/phrasal verbs](http://www.teflgames.com/phrasal%20verbs).
11. Foley, M. & Hall, D. (2008). *Longman advanced learners' grammar: A self-study reference and practice book with Answers*. Pearson Education Limited.
12. Folse, K.S. (2015). *Clear grammar: 3 keys to grammar for English Language Learners*(2<sup>nd</sup>ed.) Michigan ELT. [http://www.press.umich.edu/ 273340/clear\\_grammar\\_2ndedition](http://www.press.umich.edu/273340/clear_grammar_2ndedition), Michigan ELT.
13. Gardy, M. (1970). *Syntax and semantics of the English verb phrase*. Paris: Mouton.
14. Gairns, R. & Redman, S. (2011). *Idioms and phrasal verbs*. Oxford University Press.
15. Gardner, D. & Davies, M. (2007). Pointing Out Frequent Phrasal Verbs: A Corpus- Based Analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(2), 339-359. <https://doi.epdf/10.1002/j.1545-249.2007.tb00062.x>.
16. Gray, P. (2014). Phrasal Verb Fun: Learn phrasal verbs easily, naturally, and faster than ever before. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). *Academia.edu Journals*. [https://www.academia.edu/ 35770267/Phrasal\\_Verb\\_Fun](https://www.academia.edu/35770267/Phrasal_Verb_Fun).
17. Hemmens, A. (2007). *Advancing your phrasal verbs: Teacher's resource book. Book one*. The English Red River Press. [https://englinker.com/advancing-your-phrasal-verbs-book- one/](https://englinker.com/advancing-your-phrasal-verbs-book-one/)
18. Hornby, A. S. (2000). *Oxford advanced Learners Dictionary*. Oxford. University Press.
19. Greenbaum, S. (1996). *The Oxford English grammar*. Oxford. University Press.
20. Littlemore, J., & Low, G. (2006). Metaphoric Competence and Communicative Language Ability, *Applied Linguistics*, 27(2): 268-294.
21. McArthur, T. (1975). *Using phrasal verbs* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) London and Glasgow.
22. McCarthy, M. (1990). *Vocabulary*. Oxford. University Press.
23. McArthur, T. (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press.

24. McCarthy, M. (1997). *Phrasal verbs dictionary*. Cambridge University Press.
25. McCarthy, M., & Felicity, O. (2001). *English vocabulary in use*. Cambridge University Press.
26. McCarthy, M. (2003). *Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.
27. McCarthy, M., & Felicity, O. (2004). *English phrasal verbs in use*. Cambridge University Press.
28. McCarthy, M. & O'Dell. F. (2007): *English phrasal verbs in use*. Cambridge University Press.
29. McCarthy, M. & O'Dell. F. (2008): *English collocation in use*. Cambridge University Press.
30. McCarthy, M. & O'Dell. F. (2010): *English Idioms in Use: Advanced*. Cambridge University Press.
31. McCarthy, M. & O'Dell. F. (2017): *English Phrasal Verbs in use* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Cambridge University Press.
32. McCarthy, M. & O'Dell. F. (2017): *English Collocation in Use: Intermediate*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Cambridge University Press.
33. Miqdad, A. A. (2011) The role of mother tongue in reception and production of collocations by English Majors at the Palestinian Universities. (Unpublished Master Thesis). Islamic University of Ghaza.
34. Monika, D.M., (2020). An analysis of phrasal verb errors used by Fifth semester students of English study program of IAIN BENGKULU: (Unpublished Master's Thesis) Indonesia: Fatmawati Soekarno Bengkulu State Islamic University
35. Mordant. O. G., & McGuire M. (2020). *Phrasal verbs for English Language learners*. Cambridge University Press.
36. Nation, P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
37. Olteanu, A. (2012). *A holistic approach to English phrasal verbs*. Editura Sfântul Ierarh Nicolae. <https://www.scribd.com/document/326894841/A-holistic>
38. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of English language*. Longman.
39. Quirk, R., & Greenbaum, S. (1990). *A student's grammar of the English Language*. Longman.

40. Sangoor, M., M. (2012). A syntactico-semantic Study of English Phrasal Verbs. *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Science*, 201(2), 89-112, <https://doi.org/10.36473/ujhss.v62i4>
41. Spears, R. (1993). *NTC's dictionary of phrasal verbs and other idiomatic verbal phrases*. Illinois: National Textbook Company (NTC) Publishing Group.
42. Thomas, D. (2017). *How to teach phrasal verbs using conceptual metaphor*. Eugene: Western Oregon University.
43. Thyab, R. (2010) Phrasal Verbs in English as a Second/Foreign Language. *Arab World English Journal*, 10 (3), 429- 437. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.30>
44. Turton, N., & Manser, M. (1985). *The Student's Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.
45. Alwarikat, E. A. and Yunus, K, B. (2022). Phrasal Verbs Avoidance among Jordanian EFL University Students. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Educational Research*, 4(1), 263-271. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358702533>
46. Vasbieva, D. G (2015). Teaching Strategy on Learning of English Phrasal Verbs by Economics Major Students in Russia. *XLinguae Journal*, 8(3), 27-65, <http://DOI:10.18355/XL.2015.08.03.57-65>