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EFL Learners' Need to Know about English Phrasal Verbs

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Abstract

Research undertaken globally has revealed that English phrasal verbs (EPVs) are one of the most difficult areas for English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) learners who wish to advance and have an excellent command of the English language. Through implementing a mixed-method approach, which is comprised of descriptive and analytical approaches, this article aims to provide EFL learners with the knowledge essential for the comprehension and use of PVs. The study found out that the lack of and/or inadequate knowledge about EPVs is one of the primary causes behind the difficulty in learning them. Based on the findings, the study recommended including the fundamental knowledge of EPVs in English as a second/foreign language teaching. It is critical in EFL/ESL contexts and materials to clarify the grammatical structures, semantic properties, collocations, and registrational knowledge of PVs and how to use them appropriately. It is also recommended that EFL/ESL teachers should have excellent syntactic, semantic, collocational, and register knowledge of PVs so that they can instruct them effectively and assist their students in understanding, learning, and employing them appropriately.

Keywords: Phrasal Verb, Particle, EFL, Collocation, Register

1. Introduction

A notable phenomenon of the modern English language is the sheer quantity of phrasal verbs (PVs) and their widespread usage, which has drawn the attention of some EFL/ESL learners, most teachers, and scholars in disciplines such as linguistics, lexicography, and pedagogy to the importance of PVs for non-native speakers and the challenges they encounter when attempting to learn and use them. The difficulties EPVs pose to EFL learners, their main root causes, and how to sort them out have long been a subject of lengthy academic debate and a topic of undying interest among teachers, researchers, syllable designers, and material writers.

2. What are Phasal Verbs?

A phrasal verb (PV), according to Sangoor (2012), is a lexical verb, “usually a monosyllabic verb of action or movement,” such as go, put, take, run, etc., followed by one or more particles, which can be a preposition, an adverb, or a word that can act as either a preposition or adverb, “where the combination behaves as a syntactic and semantic unit” and the meaning is often idiomatic and cannot easily be figured out or determined by knowing the meaning of the individual parts. (p. 90). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) define a particle as an adverb (e.g., ahead, apart, aside, around, away, back, etc.) or a preposition (e.g., at, for, from, into, to, of, in, on, onto, upon, with, etc.) or can be either prepositions or adverbs, such as about, across, above, after, along, around, down, in, off, on, round, under, up, etc., that can attach to a lexical verb to form the PV. For instance, if we combine look and after, we get “look after” which means “take care of.” If we combine look and for, we get “look for” which means search for or seek, and if we combine look and out, we get “look out,” which means beware. Some PVs have two particles, both an adverb and a preposition e.g., get on with and stand up for.

McCarthy and Felicity (2001) highlight that it is possible for a combination to have a multitude of different meanings depending on the context. Some PVs have meanings that are most often non-compositional and unpredictable from the meanings of their constituent elements, such as ‘blow up,’ which means ‘explode,’ and ‘put up with,’ which means tolerate.’

Some PVs are made up of two or more orthographic words working together, and they should be viewed as a single lexical and semantic entity. The researcher observes that some EFL and ESL learners often fail to view the two- or three-word verb as a lexical unit with a distinct meaning, and they usually attempt to figure out the meanings of the individual words rather than the entire phrase as a whole unit. Some students fail to recognize the importance of the particles of the PVs. For instance, some skip the particle while others choose the incorrect ones. Such combinations of verb and particle or two particles are challenging for EFL and ESL learners. They are neither able to use them nor

understand their meanings when they are used by speakers who do use them. EPVs have thus been a common source of difficulty and frustration for non-native students in terms of their form (grammar), meaning (semantics), and use (collocation and register).

Empirical studies conducted in various EFL and ESL contexts, such as the studies of Thyab (2019), Shareef (2018), Tom and Bronshteyn (2015), Geetha and Jabenesan (2015), Mahmoud (2015), Al-Otaibi (2015), Aldukhayel (2014), Sangoor (2012), and Littlemore (2001), have revealed that the lack of and/or insufficient knowledge about PVs has been one of the main factors hindering EFL learners' learning, appropriate use, and mastery of PVs. Therefore, it is critical to provide EFL and ESL learners with the requisite linguistic knowledge to help them acquire, use, and gain mastery of EPVs.

What do EFL Learners' Need to Know about English Phrasal Verbs?

1. The Grammatical Structure of English Phrasal Verbs

Learners need to decipher the grammar patterns of EPVs. According to Armstrong (2004), Declerk (1991), Gorlach (2004), and Moon (2007), learners must understand that a PV contains multiple parts of speech (a verb and either a preposition or an adverb), resulting in three possible grammatical combinations: verb + adverb (e.g., look up, take away, answer back, go ahead), verb + preposition (e.g., look after, arrive at, take over), and verb + adverb + preposition. (e.g., back down on, be up for, cry out for). They also need to know whether a PV is transitive separable, transitive and inseparable, transitive with two particles (which are inseparable), intransitive, or ambitransitive.

1.1. Transitive Separable Phrasal Verbs

A PV is transitive when it requires a direct object to complete a sentence's meaning. According to McCarthy and Felicity (2007), transitive separable PVs are the phrasal verbs that have direct objects, and the particles can be separated from the verbs by putting the direct objects in the middle, between the main verbs and the particles. E.g.

- The teacher *called off* the test, or the teacher *called* the test *off*.
- The boy *throws away* the ball, or the boy *throws* the ball *away*.
- Will you *turn off* the television, please? Or will you *turn* the television *off*, please?
- John *cleaned out* the rooms, or John *cleaned* the rooms *out*.

According to Cele-Murcia and Larsen-Freemen (1999) and Acklam (1992), putting the objects at the end of the sentences or between the verbs and the particles composing the PVs is optional when the direct objects are nouns. However, when the direct objects are pronouns such as him, her, you, them, us, and it, the separation is obligatory, which means that the verbs and the particles must be separated by pronouns. For example:

- Jalal switched off the TV and the radio, or Jalal *switched* the TV and the radio *off*.
- Jalal *switched* them *off*, but not *Jalal switched off them.
- The firemen *put out* the fire, or the firemen *put* the fire *out*.
- The firemen put it out, but not * the firemen *put out* it.

In the above-cited examples, the asterisked sentences are ungrammatical because the objects are pronoun objects, and they must be placed between the main verbs and the particles making up the PVs.

1.2. Transitive and Inseparable Phrasal Verbs

Here, the PVs require direct objects, which cannot be inserted between the verbs and their particles. It makes no difference whether the object is a noun or a pronoun, as shown in the sentences below, noting that an asterisk indicates ungrammaticality.

- I *came across* a good economics book last night or I came across it last night. But not: * I *came* a good economics book *across* last night
- She is *working on* a novel, or she is *working on* it. But not * She is *working* a novel *on* or *She is *working* it on.
- The students *went over* the course before the exam, or the students *went over* it before the exam. But not: * The students *went* the course *over* before the exam. (Folse, 2015, p. 13).

1.3. Transitive Phrasal Verbs with two particles (the particles are inseparable)

Some PVs contain three parts: the verb and the two particles. The first particle is an adverb, whereas the second is a preposition. The verb and its particles cannot be separated; neither can the two particles, and the object comes last. For instance, in the sentences below, the verbs and the two particles that make up the PVs cannot be separated. The asterisk marks ungrammaticality.

- Hassan always *looks down on* people from other races.
- * Hassan always *looks down* people from other races *on*.
- Our teacher said she will not *put up with* such bad behavior.
- *Our teacher said she will not *put up* such bad behavior *with*. (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2007, p. 8)

1.4. Intransitive Phrasal Verbs

According to Carter and McCarthy (2006), intransitive PVs are those that do not require direct objects. They refer to an action that expresses a complete meaning without relying on an object, as a transitive does. The meaning of intransitive PVs can easily be understood without the need for the noun or pronoun to complete the meaning of the sentence. Examples of this type of PV are presented below, with the PVs italicized.

- *Look out!* This ice is not safe.

- Someone knocked at my door, and I said, ‘*Come in*’.
- They must not *look back*.
- The prisoners *got away*.
- The noise of the plane *died away*. (Thomson & Martinet, 1986, pp. 315-320).

1.5. Ambi-transitive Phrasal Verbs

Cele-Murcia and Larsen-Freemen (1999) and Folse (2015) define ambitransitive PVs as those that may perform both transitive and intransitive functions. To illustrate this, in the sentences below, the PVs take off and give up are used both transitively and intransitively.

- Mona *took off* her hat when she got home. (Transitive)
- The plan *took off*. (Intransitive).
- We often *look up* words in the dictionary. (Transitive).
- After horrible years of conflict in Sudan, things are starting to *look up*. (Intransitive).

According to McCarthy and Felicity (2004), sometimes the meaning of PV varies depending upon whether it is transitive or intransitive. ‘Took off’ in the first sentence, which is used transitively, means ‘removed’ whereas ‘took off’ in the second sentence, which is used intransitively indicates ‘leaving the ground and beginning to fly.’ Similarly, the transitive meaning of ‘look up’ (look in the dictionary for a word) in the third sentence differs from the intransitive meaning of ‘look up’ (improve, get better) in the fourth sentence. As a result, it is critical for learners to understand if a PV can be used transitively, intransitively, or both.

2. The Meaning of Phrasal Verbs

Learners need to know the meaning of PVs as a single unit. As the combination of words forming the PV functions as a lexical unit that has its own meaning, learners need to understand the meaning of the whole PV as a unit. As far as meaning is concerned, many authors agree that there are three semantic classes based on the level of semantic compositionality and meaning modification. Armstrong (2004), Cele-Murcia and Larsen-Freemen (1999), Darwin and Gray (1999), Siyanova and Schimtt (2007), Walkova (2012), and White (2012) classified the meanings of EPVs into three main categories: literal, semi-literal, and idiomatic PVs.

2.1. Literal Phrasal Verbs

They are also known as “transparent,” “non-idiomatic,” and “compositional” PVs. In this category, the PV’s meanings are derived from the meanings of the component elements that make them up. Even without the context, the meaning of literal PVs such as come back, come in, go out, stand up, get up, sit down, fall down, take out, play with, throw away, take away, put in, etc., can be inferred and

comprehended simply by looking at the meaning of the two morphemes. Knowing the meanings of the words come, go, pick, get, take, play, and throw makes it easy to understand the meaning of the PVs stated above. (Eastwood, 2006, p. 308).

2. 2. Semi-Literal Phrasal Verbs

They are also called aspectual, semi-transparent, and semi-idiomatic PVs. Workman (1996) highlights that in a semi-literal PV, the verb retains its core meaning [remains unchanged], but the particle adds additional meaning. In other words, the meanings of semi-transparent PVs are based on the meanings of the verbs, and the particles are added to emphasize the actions. The meanings of semi-literal PVs can be understood when they are incorporated into context (e.g., *drink up* your milk, she will *find out* the truth, he *read through* the lines). Supporting the same view, Fraser (1976) emphasizes that they are called aspectual because certain particles of this category modify the aspect of the root verbs by justifying the result or outcome of the action or strengthening the degree of the action indicated by the base verb. For instance, in the two sentences below, the particles “on” and “up” modify the meanings of the base verbs by reinforcing the action indicated by them.

- Jasmine *kept on* talking after I told her to be quiet. (continued talking).
- My car is old now; it *eats up* fuel. (consume).
- The plane flew on. (continue to fly).

Based upon the semantic contributions of the particle, aspectual PVs can be classified into four classes, which are as follows:

Completive: uses particles such as “up,” “out,” “down” and so on to show the completeness, ending, or stopping of an action, as in:

- The baby *drank up* her milk.
- If dams *dried up* during summer, many villagers would suffer.
- Some employees *carried out* their tasks outstandingly.
- They have been working all night, and they are *worn out*.
- The radio and TV stations were *burnt down* during the conflict.
- Many companies have *shut down* after the eruption of war in Sudan.

Continuative: uses the particle “on” to show that the action continuous, such as:

- The manager told the employees to *carry on* with their work.
- Yesterday's demonstrations *went on* for three hours.
- The soldiers *fought on* despite heavy casualties.
- The road was so bad, but they *drove on*.

Inceptive: to signal or indicate the beginning of a particular action or situation, as in:

- The plan *took off*.
- Ali *started up* a business in Germany.

Iterative (the particle over is combined with several action verbs to show repetition, as in

- The employees *did* it *over* until they got it right.
- All students need to *write* their essays *over*. (Cele-Murcia & Larsen-Freemen, 1999, pp. 432-433).

2. 3. Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs

They are also called figurative, opaque, and non-compositional PVs. Trask (2002) defines an idiom as a “fixed expression” whose meaning is not derivable from the dictionary meaning of its individual words. (p. 67). Idiomatic phrasal verbs are PVs that have figurative interpretations or meanings. That is, they mean something other than what the two words mean independently, and they cannot be comprehended in the same way as non-idiomatic because the combination of the verb and the particle triggers a metaphorical meaning that cannot be derived by isolating the meaning of the individual components. Some examples of idiomatic PVs and their meanings are shown in the sentences below.

- Her first novel *blew me away*. (impressed greatly)
- Some students could not *figure out* the answer to the third question of the test. (solve). (Collins, 2016, pp. 100 -108).
- The victim could not *pick out* the criminal from the photo (identify)
- Mathew usually does not *go along with* the ideas of the team (agree).
- As a diabetic, I always *veer away from* sugar and sweet food. (avoid) (Mordaunt & McGuire, 2020, pp. 1-28).

3. The Collocation of Phrasal Verbs

Learners need to know the collocation of the PVs. Collocation is “a natural combination of words”; it refers to the way in which a series of English words are closely associated with each other more frequently than would be expected by chance. (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2017, p. 4). It is the pairing of two or more words that frequently, commonly, or regularly co-occur and are used together. Similarly, Cowie (2005) defines collocations as “associations of two or more lexemes recognized in and defined by their occurrence in a specific range of grammatical constructions.” (p. 69). For example, pay and attention go together, do goes with exercise, make with mistakes, high with mountain and temperature, held with discussion and meeting, heavy with rain, and tall goes with man/woman. Likewise, the PV

“call off” closely associated with weddings, e.g., “the wedding party has been called off due to the heavy rain,” as well as meetings, matches, and engagements. The PV “fly around” collocates strongly with rumors, e.g. “all kinds of rumors are *flying around* closing the clinic,” as well as with ideas, remarks and accusations. The PV “flick through” collocates strongly with book, e.g., “My father is *flicking through* his favorite book,” and it also collocates strongly with *newspaper, magazine, report,* and *website*. The PV “break down” collocates strongly with negotiations, e.g., “the ceasefire negotiations have broken down”, and it also collocates strongly with talks, meetings, discussions, and marriage. Similarly, the three-word phrasal verb “*brush up on*” collocates strongly with the practice and improvement of skills or knowledge of something e.g., ‘Monica loves playing the piano, but she needs to *brush up on* it because she has not played for some time,’ ‘they must *brush up on* their Chinese before they go to China,’ and it can also collocate strongly with historical knowledge and managerial skills e.g., ‘she needs to brush up on her historical knowledge’. ‘Everyone denies these important management skills; need to *brush up on* his managerial skills.’

McCarthy and O'Dell (2017) emphasize that picking up the knowledge of EVPs and their common collocations as linguistic units is vital for the proficient use of the language because it will help learners to expand their English vocabulary and use the PVs they know more accurately and communicate more naturally. Therefore, when learning PVs, it is crucial for learners to observe what sorts of words the verb is commonly used with. Can it be used, for example, only for people, or only for things or for both people and things? Can it be applied to both positive and negative things, or is it only used for negative things? According to Gray (2014), the PV ‘believe in’ collocates with objects denoting both people and things. In the sentence ‘You can solve the problem; I believe in you,’ to believe in somebody means to have confidence that he or she is a good, trustworthy person, or that he or she can do something well. In the sentence ‘My father believes in hard work and helping others,’ to believe in something such as hard work and helping others is to have a strong belief that something is good or right. Some PVs collocate with subjects denoting both people and things. For instance, the PV “stream into” in the sentence ‘As we opened the door, the water streamed into the room,’ collocates with subject denoting a thing (water), whereas in the sentence ‘staff are streaming into the meeting,’ collocates with a subject denoting people (staff). Some PVs are used to denote negative things. For instance, the PV “riddle with” is used to collocate with negative things such as problems, challenges, diseases etc. In the sentence ‘The plan was riddled with many economic problems/challenges. The PVs “riddle with” cannot be used to denote positive things such as good ideas or opinions. We cannot say ‘the plan was riddled with many good ideas or opinions, because the PV is only used to denote negative things. Similarly, the PV “hit upon” only collocates with positive things such as good ideas,

solutions and results. We can say ‘After lengthy discussions, the national staff association hit upon a good idea, solution, or result.’ It cannot be used to associate with negative things. Therefore, we cannot say, for example, after lengthy discussions, the national staff association hit upon a stupid plan.’ In addition, the adverbial particle “up” is preferred with the verb root of positive value and “down” with the verb root of negative value. For instance, “slow” occurs more frequently with “down” than with “up” while “speed” occurs with “up” only and not with “down.” Similarly, “brighten” is preferred with “up” while “dim” is more frequently occurs with “down.” (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2007, p. 14).

4. The Register of Phrasal Verbs

Learners need to know the register of the PVs. A register, according to Yule (2010), is the various ways of using language that are appropriate in a specific context or a particular field, which may be classified as situational (for example, in a school, church, hospital, etc.), topical (for instance, talking about language), occupational (for example, two doctors use medical jargon) or suitable for a particular purpose such as political, legal, judicial, religious, literary, scientific, advertising, and newspaper. Register is “a word often used to refer to whether a word is formal or informal.” (McCarthy & Felicity, 2007, p. 16). As PVs are used in various formal and informal contexts, learners should know whether a PV is used formally or informally or if it is associated with certain situations or contexts. For example, in the first two sentences below, the PVs *preside over* (be in charge of) and *accede to* (agree to) are used formally because the base verbs themselves and the context in which they are used are formal, whereas in the last two sentences, the PVs *hang around* (spend a lot of time with) and *shoot down* (criticize strongly) are used informally because the context in which they are used is informal.

- The minister of interior is to *preside over* the government enquiry team.
- The authorities finally *acceded to* his request for an entry visa permit.
- They *hang around* together in every break.
- If Lara does not *shoot down* one of my ideas, Mike does.

As one of the defining features of a register is the use of special technical vocabulary associated with a specific area or field, some PVs are associated with certain registers. For instance, the PVs *back up*, *copy in*, *log in*, *log on*, *log off*, *log out*, *scroll down*, *scroll up*, *swipe left*, *swipe right*, and *print out* are associated with communication and information technology (ICT). (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2017, pp. 16-17). The PVs *phone back*, *phone in*, *ring off*, *ring/call/phone around*, *pick up*, *hang up*, *put on*, *get through*, and *put through* are associated with telephones. Additionally, the PVs *cloud over*, *pour down*,

warm up, blow over, ice up, clear up, and rain off are associated with weather and climates. (Hemmens, 2007, pp. 36-61).

5. Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, which is comprised of a descriptive approach and an analytical approach. To collect the required data and achieve the objectives of the study, the research used scholarly sources written by academics and experts on EVPs, namely, scholarly books, journal articles, theses, and dissertations conducted on the challenges of learning and using EVPs in different EFL and ESL contexts by doctoral and master's students, in addition to the researcher's observations of the challenges that students face when attempting to learn and employ PVs.

6. Conclusion

The study aimed at providing EFL learners with the knowledge they required to understand and utilize PVs. One of the main causes of their learning difficulties has been the lack of and/or insufficient knowledge about EVPs. The study recommended including the knowledge of EPVs in English as a second/foreign language education. It is critical in EFL/ESL contexts and materials to clarify the grammatical patterns, semantic properties, collocation, and registral knowledge of PVs and how to use them properly. The study also recommended that EFL/ESL teachers should possess solid grammatical, semantic, collocational, and register knowledge of PVs so that they can assist their students in comprehending, learning, and using them effectively. Therefore, EPVs' knowledge is a cornerstone for addressing and sorting out their learning difficulties.

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