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THE ACQUISITION OF PHRASAL VERBS IN L2 ENGLISH: A LITERATURE REVIEW

TOM GUSTAFSON AND KAREN CATHCART BRONSHITEYN

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the linguistic element called the phrasal verb, which consists of a verb followed by a particle, such as to “eat out.” The challenges facing L2 students attempting to master phrasal verbs are considered, followed by a proposed approach to teaching semantic as well as syntactic understanding of these structures. We conclude with a review of literature which proposes innovative teaching techniques. We conclude that there is promise that some of these techniques can assist students to master phrasal verbs, and that more research is necessary to determine the most effective approaches.

1.0 Why do Phrasal Verbs Matter?

“Jack and Jill ran up the *hill*.” “Jack and Jill ran up the *bill*.” Many ESL students, and perhaps even teachers, would find it difficult to classify the verb phrase in each of these sentences (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011, p. 120). Even if an astute observer correctly identified the phrasal verb in the second sentence, few would be able to provide objective reasons for the classification. And even more unusual would be the language teacher who can utilize effective pedagogical strategies that help ESL students comprehend and use phrasal verbs.

Phrasal verbs (PVs) are inherently difficult for ESL learners to master. This suggests a need for a more complete understanding of this grammatical structure, and calls for new teaching strategies that go beyond syntactic identification or lists and groupings for memorization. This paper will examine research which indicates that ESL students often avoid PVs and frequently stumble when they attempt to use them. Additionally, this paper will survey the literature relevant to pedagogical strategies that can assist L2 students in the acquisition of PVs.

2.0 What are Phrasal Verbs?

PVs are defined as “a verb + particle combination that functions as a single verb, both parts giving up meaning in order to form a new lexical item” (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p. 65). White (2012) contends that PVs are difficult for ESL learners because they are unpredictable, polysemous, frequent, and non-universal. They are unpredictable because the meanings can sometimes be literal, as in *stand up*, aspectual, as in *speak up*, or idiomatic, as in *butter up*. They are polysemous, meaning one PV can have multiple meanings. Students *turn in* homework, criminals are *turned in* to authorities, and when people go to bed, they *turn in* for the night. Native speakers frequently use PVs. According to Gardner and Davies (2007), “learners will encounter, on average, one [phrasal verb construction] in every 150 words of English they are exposed to” (p. 347). Adding to the frequency problem is the knack English speakers possess for coining new PVs. PVs are called the “most prolific source” of new words in English (Bolinger, 1971, p. xiii). Today students don’t socialize, they *hang out*. When they tell somebody to relax, they ask him/her to *chill out*. Finally, PVs are not universal. Some languages have them, such as Dutch and Swedish, while others don’t, such as Hebrew and Chinese (Liao and

Fukuya, 2004). Even if a student's L1 has PVs, it is unlikely that there will be a consistent correspondence between PVs in the L1 and the L2 because of their idiomatic nature. Therefore, language transfer will be of limited value in the learning of PVs. And actually, when a similar correspondence between languages exists, it often confuses the L2 learner and leads to mistakes (Chan & Liou, 2005). It is apropos that one researcher says "...the phrasal verb is a syntactic oddity in the language world..." (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p. 65).

3.0 Mastery Problems and Avoidance

Schachter (1974) pioneered the study of avoidance in L2 learners. Rather than study the mistakes that learners make in their production, Schachter investigated what they avoided. Since this early study, many others have researched avoidance of various structures in English, including PVs.

Liao and Fukuya (2004) studied avoidance of English PVs by Chinese learners. They first reviewed three previous studies in which L1 speakers of Hebrew, Dutch, and Swedish were tested for avoidance of English PVs. The Hebrew-speaking students, who don't have PVs in their native language, tended to avoid PVs, and most regularly those with an idiomatic meaning (Dagut and Laufer, 1985). Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) studied Dutch learners of English, expecting that they would not avoid PVs because they have them in their native language. Their results suggest that the Dutch students did not avoid PVs categorically, but did tend to avoid idiomatic PVs that seemed too Dutch-like. Strangely, PVs that had a similar counterpart in the L1 were avoided. Thirdly, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) studied advanced Swedish learners of English, whose L1 also shares the PV structure with English. Their results suggest that PVs were not avoided by Swedish L1 learners, and they did not find the same idiomatic-similarity avoidance that Hulstijn and Marchena observed.

Liao and Fukuya tested 70 students in intermediate and advanced ESL courses. Participants took one of three tests (multiple-choice, translation, or recall) which included literal and figurative PVs. Fifteen native speakers also took the multiple-choice test as a control group. The results suggest that intermediate learners avoided the use of PVs much more often than advanced learners. This helps to explain why the advanced Swedish L1 students did not avoid PVs. Advanced-level learners used PVs less than the native speakers did, but not by a significant margin. The authors concluded that interlanguage development plays a significant role in the diminishing avoidance of PVs. Further, all three groups in this study, including native speakers, favored literal PVs over figurative PVs, regardless of their proficiency level.

The authors concluded that avoidance of PV usage will diminish as proficiency increases. This is encouraging for ESL teachers, and provides an incentive for implementing effective strategies for teaching PVs.

4.0 ESL Instructor Knowledge of Phrasal Verbs

PVs can be challenging for students and teachers alike. Darwin and Gray (1999, p. 67) comment that their classification can be “slippery,” mainstream grouping exercises are not particularly helpful, and that the pedagogy is lacking in agreement on a core of phrasal verbs.

Armstrong (2004) encouraged teachers to increase their knowledge of PVs beyond the syntactic tests that are typically learned in teacher training. Traditional training for ESL teachers includes syntactic tests for identifying PVs, such as the Particle Shift and Adverbial Insertion tests (Koffi, 2010, pp. 310-313). Armstrong suggests that teachers need further knowledge about the semantics of PVs. He classifies PVs into three semantic types: directional, aspectual, and idiomatic.

Directional PVs are translated literally. The individual components of the phrase make the meaning apparent, as in <Jo *hauled up* the anchor>. With aspectual PVs, the verb component can be understood literally, but the particle doesn't have a transparent meaning, as in <Jo *tore up* the contract>. Idiomatic PVs have a meaning unrelated to the verb or the particle, as in <Jo *rubbed out* her friend>. Armstrong posits that idiomatic PVs are stored as a single unit in the mental lexicon, while directional PVs are stored as individual lexical items.

Most ESL teachers are familiar with syntactic tests that help to identify a PV, but these tests are of little help in decoding its meaning. Further, syntactic tests have limited applicability. Some syntactic tests are only effective with transitive PVs, such as <Jo *tore up* the contract>. However, intransitive PVs, such as <the plane *took off*> are not subject to adverbial insertion, particle shift, or pronoun substitution for the object of the PV. We can identify a PV with particle shift with this simple move of the particle: <Jo *tore* the contract *up*>. However, with a PV like <the plane *took off*>, there is nowhere to move the particle. Note that PP-Preposing is still possible with an intransitive PV, as in <*off* the plane *took*>, which tells us that *off* is not a preposition, but an immovable particle.

Therefore, Armstrong suggests that ESL teachers need to add semantic knowledge to their repertoire. Once phrasal verbs are identified, they can be semantically classified as directional, aspectual, or idiomatic. Because directional PVs are fully compositional, learners can translate them directly. Idiomatic PVs need to be learned as lexical units, just as any other vocabulary item would be learned. Therefore, *bring up* means ‘educate’ and *rub out* means ‘kill’. Aspectual PVs can be recognized as retaining the literal meaning of the verb, with an idiomatic meaning of the particle. PVs like *heat up*, *tire out*, and *slow down*, if recognized as aspectual, can be learned in this manner.

Armstrong suggests further research to test the validity of his claim that increased semantic awareness of PVs will make ESL teachers more effective. A proficient knowledge of PVs is necessary to afford success with any of the following pedagogical strategies.

5.0 Innovations in Teaching the Phrasal Verb

Given the difficulty in learning PVs, a review of the literature on the analysis of teaching methods is worthy of our time. Three recent and innovative studies on the pedagogy of PVs have been selected for examination.

Nassaji & Tian (2010) conducted a study in Canada with 26 students engaging in collaborative pair work with 16 English PVs. The students' existing knowledge of PVs was gauged in a pretest. Then the students completed reconstruction cloze tasks and reconstruction edit tasks; one of each individually, and one of each collaboratively. An example of the edit task is borrowed from page 418. Students were to look for PVs and determine if the usage is correct, then edit them as appropriate. In this example (which did not contain the highlighting,) they needed to find “fed up” and “paid for” and determine that neither is an appropriate pair, it should be “broke up” and “paid off.”

<p>Cathy: Well, you know that George and I fed up. I was really heart broken about it. So I decided to move to Paris.</p> <p>Melissa: Wow, so it paid for to study French at school.</p>
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After a posttest and data analysis, the conclusion was that collaborative work has higher results with either task than does individual work, but the difference in learning is not statistically significant. The authors state, however, that the addition of a training session for the students to work collaboratively would lead to better performance in pairs. The difference in type of tasks, cloze vs. edit, however, showed a significant difference. The analysis of transcripts from the collaborative work shows that sometimes the interaction on cloze tasks was too brief. Students working in pairs experienced a larger gain with the edit tasks, partly due to the nature of the task lending itself to more talk and feedback.

Oe and Alam (2013), from Hosei University in Japan, developed a study to find a way to teach PVs while negating the interference from the learner's L1. They chose to instruct “...directly through nonverbal media such as pictures and sound. A web application was developed for the picture-based e-learning of phrasal verbs” (p. 222). They used two different groups of college freshmen studying EFL, and they worked with 30 PVs per session, two sessions each. One session involved gloss-choice questions, and the other picture questions. An example picture question is borrowed from page 225. Participants were supposed to determine which of these four pictures illustrate the phrase verb to break in (a conversation). The correct choice is the picture on the far right.

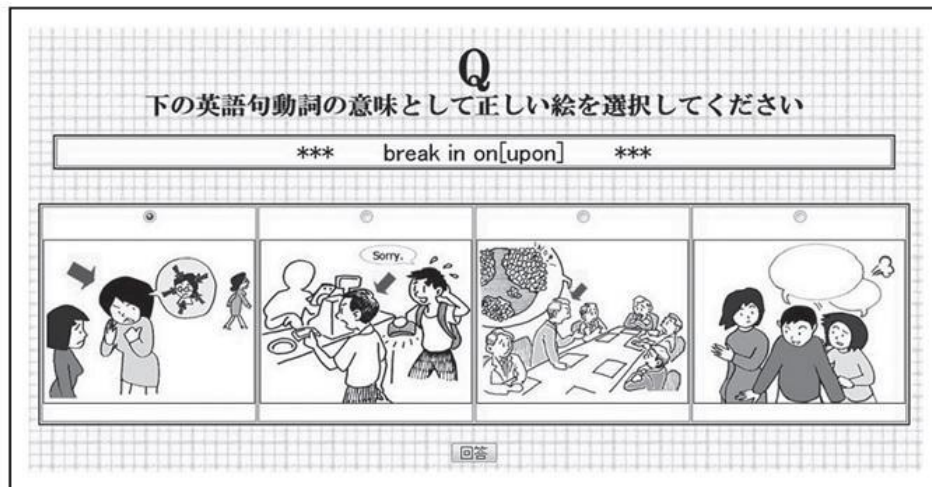


Figure 2

Participants were able to use PVs in sentences more effectively after the picture sessions. A second session with L1 glosses improved their ability to give L1 equivalents, but decreased their ability to use them in a sentence. Some problems cited with the study were that the students were not motivated since it was outside of their coursework, and the amount of practice time per PV (two minutes) was deemed to be inadequate. The researchers encourage the use of pictures, but they suggest increasing the time and interactivity with each picture. Their advice is to have students type the PV, use manga scenes with context, decrease the number of questions, and increase the number of repetitions. They also suggest focusing on only 20 instead of 30 PVs, using 10 new PVs each exercise and repeating 10 from the previous one. The authors also recommend integrating the exercise into coursework to increase student motivation.

White (2012) conducted a seven-week study in two college-level ESL courses that allowed 30 participants to find their own examples of PVs, and then use their individual creativity to draw a sketch of the situation. This approach was selected due to the unpredictability of PVs. Lack of predictability, of course, causes pedagogical and learning retention problems. “To illustrate the learner’s predicament, why should face combined with off mean that a confrontation is beginning” (White, p. 419)? White’s second main impetus for attempting a new approach is the polysemous nature of PVs. He mentions a dictionary (American Heritage Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, 2005), that gives 21 different definitions for “go on.” Although PVs are numerous, idiomatic, often polysemous, and basically unpredictable, they carry important metaphorical meaning: “...metaphorical extensions can be spotted in the classroom. Doing so may provide learners a means towards breaking through the opacity and idiomaticity of phrasal verbs” (White, p. 421). The study introduced a 5-step methodology that involves reorienting students to the meanings, having them gather PVs, discussing the meaning through an illustrative worksheet, drawing after small group discussions, and then sharing their drawings. By drawing, the student ends up with a type of symbolism with which to

convey personal meaning to classmates. Several student examples are provided, such as the drawing for “reach out” on p. 429:

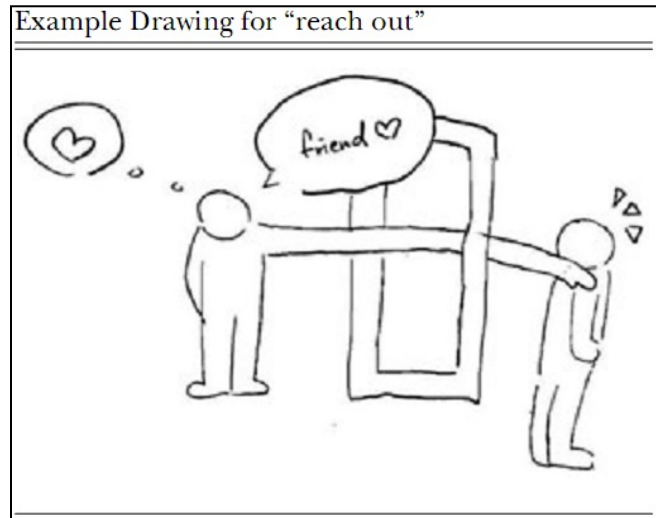


Figure 3

The study reports “modest” results, yet the scores did increase for more than half of the participants, even though it seems that some of the phrasal verbs tested were not part of the exercise. Obviously this could be addressed in a further study.

6.0 Conclusion

Phrasal verbs present a challenge for language teachers and students, as evidenced by the amount of research that has been done to understand, classify, and teach them. ESL teachers are typically given a knowledge of syntactic tests to identify PVs, but a deeper semantic knowledge may help them teach more effectively. Empirical research is needed to establish this claim. Teaching strategies beyond memorization, syntactic rules, and categorization have been proposed by several researchers. Studies indicate that some of these strategies may help ESL students better grasp the identification and interpretation of PVs. These strategies need to be examined further with more languages, better methodologies, and multiple levels of students to verify their effectiveness.

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