

Creativity and Unnaturalness in the Use of Phrasal Verbs in ESL Learner Language

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ABSTRACT

Interest in ESL learner language has gained momentum since the 1990s with the generation of learner corpora, development of robust Concordance software and the establishment of the principles of the corpus –linguistic methodology. All these innovations have empowered researchers to investigate not only the frequent but also the idiosyncratic features of different language phenomena in learner language. This corpus-based content analysis study was an attempt to explore the phenomena of creativity and unnaturalness in the use of phrasal verbs in an ESL context. Findings revealed that albeit the ESL learners were competent enough in creating compositional phrasal verbs, hence creative, they often produced unusual forms in their attempt to use and create idiomatic phrasal verbs. Materials developers and teachers are, therefore, recommended to provide materials and learning activities that would enable ESL learners to more effectively acquire phrasal verbs in general and idiomatic combinations in particular.

Keywords: phrasal verbs; learner corpora; ESL learner; creativity; naturalness

INTRODUCTION

Interest in the study of learner English has gained momentum since the 1990s with the generation of learner corpora such as the International Corpus of Learner English. In addition, the emergence of corpus-linguistic methodology along with new technology opened up new possibilities for a detailed investigation of learner corpora. Granger (2002, p. 7) defines learner corpora as “electronic collections of authentic FL/SL textual data assembled according to explicit design criteria for a particular SLA/FLT purpose”. New technology has enabled the researchers to investigate not only what is probable in learner corpora by revealing the features of high frequency counts, but also what is possible in the learners’ use of the language, that is, the infrequent and even the idiosyncratic features that are largely learner specific.

A number of factors might affect language learning and teaching as well. Learner factors such as learning styles, needs and motivation have received due attention from scholars, and studies dealing with these dimensions have, to some extent, informed the development of learner-tailored syllabuses and instructional materials. However, the most

important factor, namely, the learner output, seems to be noticeably missing (Mark 1998). It is, therefore, sensible that the attention of the SLA researchers should be turned towards the study of learner corpora for designing and developing more appropriate, learner-centered materials.

Two important phenomena are of interest in this study of learner corpora, namely unnaturalness and creativity. By unnaturalness, we mean any learner production which is inappropriate not only in grammatical but also in pragmatic terms. To put this into perspective, even if a given language string complies with the basic rules of English, native speakers may consider it as un-English simply because of inappropriate use. Granger (1996) takes this notion into account when he observes that the main interest in the studies on learner English is “to uncover the factors of non-nativeness or foreign-soundingness” (p. 17). The second aspect of research interest is creativity. By definition, creativity refers to the acceptable lexical strings which learners create by making analogy with the existing patterns (Side 1990) but have no entry in the reference dictionaries. The investigation of these two phenomena in ESL learners’ production of phrasal verbs is especially valuable since these combinations are considered as a fertile area for new creations (Greenbaum 1996).

In addition to their potential for creativity, phrasal verbs are intrinsically problematic for language learners. To begin with, they are almost unique to Germanic languages (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999), and are quite alien to learners from non-German languages like Malay. In addition to the syntactic diversity associated with them, these structures enjoy a remarkable degree of semantic complexity. It is, in fact, due to the various degrees of compositionality of phrasal verbs that they are often categorized as literal, aspectual and idiomatic. Unlike the literal forms (sit down), the idiomatic forms (give up) convey some meaning aspects that cannot be figured out by the literal interpretation of the meanings of the lexical verb and its associated particle. In a similar way, the particle element in aspectual forms (clean up) assumes a new aspect of meaning that is not commonly associated with it.

Whether despite the syntactic and semantic complexity of these combinations or because of it, some pedagogic grammars have been shown to misrepresent linguistic facts (Side 2005, Koprowski 2005) or at least leave some common patterns unaccounted for (Tognini-Bonelli 2001). More specifically, it is often observed that course books either present phrasal verbs in a way that implies that these combinations do not have any systematic patterns or fail to create learnable patterns or even create patterns of the wrong kind (Side 1990). The researchers are of the opinion that the difficulties EFL/ESL learners often encounter in using these combinations might be motivated by the ELT materials they experience. It is hoped that results of the study will enable materials developers produce more appropriate and systematic presentation of these challenging structures and shed more light on some of the ESL/EFL learner weaknesses and strengths in producing them.

PHRASAL VERBS IN CORPUS-BASED STUDIES

While phrasal verbs have been studied almost extensively in general corpora, there exist very few studies dealing with them in learner corpora. One such study dealing extensively with these notoriously challenging combinations is that of Von’s (2007). He investigated the use of phrasal verbs in the German and Italian components of the International Corpus of Learner English and compared the findings with the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays. Although German learners made use of more phrasal verbs than both Italian and native

students, elements of unnaturalness appeared to be shared by both German and Italian learners.

Schneider (2004), in a cross-lingual study, studied the use of phrasal verbs in four sub-corpora of International Corpus of English (ICE) from Singapore, the Philippines, India, and East Africa and compared them against the British English ICE corpus. The study was intended to investigate how the occurrence, frequency, structural behavior and productivity of these combinations varied across the speakers of each language variety. The results revealed Singaporean learners of English showed a high tendency to use phrasal verbs, even higher than the native speakers. This tendency was, nevertheless, noticeably lower among the speakers of other varieties. For instance, while Singaporeans used 68 cases per one million tokens, Tanzanians used 29, Indians used 26, the Philippines used 35, and native speakers used only 55 items per million running words. In addition, there appeared an inverse relationship between a variety's propensity to use phrasal verbs and their level of stylistic formality. While in Singapore these combinations strongly featured spoken English as in British English (BrE), they tended to be stylistically associated with more formal styles in the other ESL varieties. As to the productivity of phrasal verbs, Singaporean English employed a wider range of the potential word meanings associated with phrasal verbs than any other variety including BrE. Indian English roughly compared with BrE in terms of the number of meanings documented; however, the Philippines and East Africa proved to show a heavier reservation and reluctance towards using phrasal verbs.

Finally, Akbari (2009) explored Malaysian ESL learners' use of phrasal verbs in narrative compositions sampled from the EMAS, a learner corpus of Malaysian ESL School Students created by Universiti Putra Malaysia. Although findings revealed that the learners often applied phrasal verbs inaccurately both syntactically and semantically and made low use of idiomatic combinations, some comments are in order. First, the reported low use of phrasal verbs by Malaysian learners can be attributed to the unrepresentativeness of the corpus of the study. To put this into perspective, the researcher used a small-scale sample of the EMAS, namely, the narrative writings, and this can put the representativeness of the corpus into question. Second, the criteria employed for determining the compositionality degrees of phrasal verbs are unclear. For instance, it is not clear why 'break out' was classified as aspectual but 'break off' was considered to be idiomatic.

PHRASAL VERBS IN NON-CORPUS STUDIES

In addition to the descriptive corpus-based studies on the use of the phrasal verbs in real language use (Gardner & Davies 2007, Schneider 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt 2007, Trebits 2009), a few experimental studies investigated the impact of compositionality degree of phrasal verbs and learners' first language on the use of these combinations among non-native learners. Dagut and Laufer (1985) explored the active use of English phrasal verbs by Hebrew speaking university students majoring in English. The learners' preference for the use of phrasal verbs over their one-word equivalents enabled the researchers to conclude that the absence of phrasal verbs in non-Germanic languages, including Hebrew, made for the subjects' avoidance of them. Next, in a follow-up study, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) tested Dutch learners of English for using phrasal verbs. Overall results showed that both intermediate and advanced Dutch learners avoided idiomatic forms, implying the effect of semantic complexity on the use of these combinations. In addition, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) found that Swedish learners used significantly more phrasal verbs, especially opaque combinations, than Dagut and Laufer's (1985) Hebrew learners. Although the study backed

the impact of L1-L2 dis/similarity on the use or avoidance of phrasal verbs, it failed to support the impact of compositionality level on the avoidance of phrasal verbs. Likewise, Sjöholm's investigation (1995) of Finnish and Swedish speaking learners of English revealed that the two learner groups underused phrasal verb combinations in comparison with native speakers. He, however, found that Swedish-speaking learners used significantly more phrasal verbs than Finnish-speaking students. This is because Swedish as a Germanic language, unlike Finnish, involves a phrasal-verb correspondent. Finally, Liao and Fukuya (2004) explored the use of phrasal verbs among the Chinese intermediate and advanced learners of English. Chinese learners' underuse of phrasal verbs, especially figurative ones, raises further support for the impact of the L1-L2 difference and compositionality level on the avoidance of these combinations.

To sum up, results of the empirical studies of ESL/EFL learners' use of phrasal verbs show that learners usually tend to avoid using these combinations, and their use of these forms reveal some degree of unnaturalness. The current study was, thus, carried out on the EMAS corpus to:

1. Determine the phrasal verb combinations and their constituent elements in the corpus
2. Investigate the issue of creativeness in the Malaysian ESL learners' use of phrasal verbs
3. Explore the phenomenon of unnaturalness in the Malaysian ESL learners' use of phrasal verbs

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a corpus-based content analysis of the use of phrasal verbs in the EMAS corpus. The EMAS is a corpus of English language of Malaysian School Students which was created by Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2002. It is a corpus of around 32,555 tokens and contains written essays and oral data of 872 students at Form One and Form Four Secondary Level and Form Five Primary Level. This study, however, excluded the data collected from the Primary Level students for the simple reason that because of their low competency in English they produced only a small number of phrasal verbs.

One of the key issues in studies dealing with phrasal verbs in corpus-based studies is the extraction of these combinations. Although an extensive number of the lexical verbs are prone to combine with one or more particles forming phrasal verbs, the number of particles is, however, quite limited. For instance, in a recent study, Zarifi (2013) opted for a list of 22 particle items as they argued that some elements like 'overboard' is said to appear in 'idioms' rather than in phrasal verbs (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th ed.). In a similar way, some others like 'past' failed to combine with any lexical verb in the phrasal verbs in the corpus they studied. The researchers decided to use the same 22-item list as the potential particle elements in this study as well. This list is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Potential English Particles

About	Across	After	Ahead	Along	Around
Away	Back	By	Down	For	Forward
In	Off	On	Out	Over	Part
Round	Through	Up	With		

With this list in mind, first the concordance function of the WordSmith software version 4.0 was run to extract all the potential particle elements in the corpus. However, since phrasal verb combinations behave syntactically differently, with the particle element falling at any distance from its verb, the second step consisted of looking horizontally into the concordance lines to locate every occurrence of a particle element with a lexical verb of up to 5 words to its left. The query was limited to this length as the search beyond this length scenario usually leads to wrong combinations (Trebits 2009). In this study, “a phrasal verb is defined as combination of a lexical verb and a non-prepositional particle element that is either adjacent or nonadjacent to the verb” (Zarifi 2013, p. 20). A snapshot of the Concordance lines of the particle OUT is presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. A concordance snapshot of the use of ‘OUT’ in the EMAS Corpus

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	Word #	t
1	say "I do". This is the easiest to voice out and after exchange our ring, this is			199	
2	to say much and the Father will give out a speech and both of us just have to			180	
3	was overjoyed with the news. We went out and celebrated. That night on my bed			343	3
4	happen again. Then, the teacher came out and asked us to go into the office.			188	2
5	my attention. "The PMR result are out" I was so excited. The caller was Su			92	1
6	other end was shouting "It is out! It is out!". "What?" I asked. Who is this			57	
7	at the other end was shouting "It is out! It is out!". "What?" I asked. Who is			54	
8	up and bite my lips in order not to cry out. This has been a little secret within			190	1
9	clock startled me up. When I looked out of the window, the couple was not			318	2
10	I was alone in the house. As I peep out of the window, I saw a couple was			24	

In the next step, all the instances of lexical verbs followed by a particle element were tagged as ‘VPart’ or ‘VPrep’ depending on the function of the particle in each unit. Then, all the extracted combinations were lemmatized to have all the inflectional forms of each phrasal verb counted together. From here on, phrasal verb lemmas are orthographically highlighted in uppercase letters in the study.

Finally, the extracted combinations were judged for their acceptability in the language in terms of the context in which they appeared. These were first sourced in dictionaries like

Longman, Webster, Oxford, and the Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs. If a combination failed to have a dictionary entry, it was, following Von (2007), checked out against the British National Corpus (BNC), which comprises samples of written and spoken British English texts from a wide range of resources. If application of the above criteria failed to attest the acceptability of the combination, two native experts were consulted.

RESULTS

The concordance function of WordSmith Tools version 4.0 showed that combinations of verb + Particle elements in the corpus, featuring phrasal verbs, totaled to 11033. Identification of the combinations yielded a total number of 8351 cases of Verb + Preposition forms and 2682 instances of V+ Adverb particle units.

TABLE 2 Frequency of PV types in the EMAS

Form	VPrep	VAdv	Total
One	3568	849	(4417)
Four	4783	1833	(6616)
Total	8351	2682	11033

As shown in Table 2, there existed a total of 4417 tokens of Verb+Particle forms in Form One out of which 3568 instances acted as Verb-Preposition and 849 instances acted as Verb+Adverb units. There also occurred 6616 instances of Verb+Particle forms in Form Four out of which 4783 instances acted as Verb-Preposition forms and 1833 cases acted as Verb-Adverb forms. It is necessary to point out that unacceptable combinations were also included whether or not the expression of the intended meaning could be achieved based on the context. For instance, while PICK UP is a common phrasal verb in English, it is, however, in the utterance "... PICKED UP the flowers" unacceptable and the meaning can be easily expressed by the lexical verb PICK. Yet, PICK UP and many other ill-formed combinations like STATE OUT which are categorically non-English were counted as phrasal verbs.

Prepositional verbs were excluded from the following stages of analysis since they are inherently of different nature. To begin with, V+ Preposition particle combinations are almost fixed units and there is almost one or a highly limited number of prepositions that may follow a certain verb. For instance, lexical verbs INSIST, RESULT and DISCUSS are almost always used with prepositions ON, IN and WITH. There are very few verbs like AGREE, THINK and TALK that might be used with more than one preposition. Even with these verbs, the number of prepositions they combine with is quite restricted. To follow, there seem to be no or very rare innovations in the type of preposition that any verb might be used with. Finally, prepositions are always used before the NP that follows its related verb, and there is no change of position as is often the case with phrasal verb combinations composed of V+ Adverb particle. As a result, learners' unusual use of these forms is definitely interpreted as unacceptable and non-English.

TABLE 3. PV tokens and lemmas in EMAS

Form	Word Token	VPart token	VPart per 100 tokens	VPart Lemma	VPart Lemma per 100 tokens
One	8500	849	9.99	286	3.36
Four	14000	1833	13.09	700	5.00
Total	22500	2682	11.92	986	4.38

Table 3 reveals the frequency count of the combinations per one hundred tokens in the corpus. Although phrasal verbs have been reported to occur once per 150 tokens in the BNC (Gardner & Davies 2007), they occurred about 12 times per 100 tokens in the EMAS. The high frequency counts of the combinations WAKE UP, FALL DOWN, PICK UP, GO BACK, COME BACK, RUN AWAY etc. which were motivated by the topics could account for the unnaturally high frequency counts of the phrasal verbs in the corpus. This aspect of learner language will be dealt with in terms of the phenomenon of unnaturalness.

TABLE 4 .Top 20 PVs in EMAS

Phrasal verb	Frequency	EMAS rank	BNC rank
Wake up	160	1	*
Go back	158	2	5
Fall down	155	3	*
Pick up	121	4	4
Run away	119	5	*
Come back	77	6	6
Go out	74	7	7
pull up	47	8	*
Get up	40	9	25
Come out	39	10	13
Set up	38	11	3
Bring along	32	12	*
Turn back	30	13	56
Go on	29	14	1
Find out	28	15.5	9
Calm down	28	15.5	*
Grow up	24	17	*
Take part	23	19	*
Bring back	23	19	40
Bring up	23	19	36

The asterisk sign (*) indicates that the item is not included in the top 100 phrasal verb lemmas in the BNC.

Table 4 shows the top 20 phrasal verb lemmas in the whole corpus. Each of these combinations turned out to have a frequency count of 23 times or more. They included 47% of all the phrasal verb lemmas in the corpus. As shown in the table, a number of these highly frequent forms like WAKE UP, FALL DOWN, RUN AWAY and PULL UP are not even among the top one hundred combinations in the BNC, hence an instance of unnaturalness.

DISCUSSION

In order to explore the phenomena of creativity and naturalness, the researchers went on to judge the extracted constructions for their acceptability in English in terms of the criteria settled for in the methodology. Any combination that appeared possible in terms of the existing patterns of phrasal verbs and with at least five frequency counts in the BNC was recognized as a new creation even if it did not have any entry in reference dictionaries. On the other hand, aspects revealing unnaturalness of the learner's use of phrasal verbs involved wrong use of particle, inappropriate use of phrasal verb, collocational deviations, overuse of rare forms and underuse of common forms. Therefore, it was not only the unacceptable forms but also the combinations that appeared to be either too frequent or infrequent when judged against the BNC were taken to be indicative of unnaturalness. This position was largely informed by Granger et al.'s (2009) observation that non-nativeness in learner productions is "as much (if not more) a question of over- and under-use of linguistic items or structures as a question of downright errors" (p.41).

The first and perhaps newest creations of phrasal verbs in the learner language appeared to be combinations with OUT. OUT, typically "includes in its meaning the concept of a container and an object which moves *out of* the container" (Rudzka-Ostyn 2003, p. 14). It can be used creatively with verbs that express motion such as GO, DRIVE and COME and the verbs suggesting the act of exerting pressure to have something out of a container such as FORCE, PUSH and PUMP. The students, knowing this meaning of the adverb particle and being aware of the semantic potentiality of certain lexical verbs, correctly created non-idiomatic items like PUSH OUT, SPRAY OUT, WALK OUT, etc. To put this into perspective, while idiomatic WALK OUT means 'to leave a meeting, a performance, etc. suddenly before it stops or to stop working and go on strike' (The Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs), it was used in the corpus to mean 'walking out of an enclosure'. Although there is no dictionary entry for these new creations with the meanings intended in the corpus, they are acceptable forms to native speakers since adverbial particles, unlike prepositions and real particles, can freely combine with most of the lexical verbs. These forms and many others of the same nature are abundantly found in the BNC. It is interesting to point out that the learners' high tendency for creation of new items based on analogy with similar existing patterns led to the forging of such strings as 'PINCH OUT water'. The learner who has created this phrasal verb was, in fact, aware of the meaning of the particle OUT but ignorant of the meaning of the lexical verb PINCH (grip something, typically a person's flesh tightly and sharply between finger and thumb) (Oxford Dictionaries Online).

Another particle with high potentiality for combining with lexical verbs is ON. According to Bolinger (1971 p. 107) and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999 p. 432), ON expresses the aspectual meaning of "continuation", or "durative aspect". This particle element can freely combine with most of the lexical verbs especially those indicating 'motion'. The learners who had previously encountered such forms as GO ON, MOVE ON managed to create new forms like RIDE ON, WALK ON, CRY ON which turn out to be acceptable albeit with no entry in reference dictionaries. These combinations have more than 50 frequency counts each in the BNC, are acceptable to the native speakers, hence an indication of creative use of phrasal verbs by the ESL learners.

Another instance of learners' creative use of phrasal verbs had to do with combinations with AWAY. According to Rudzka-Ostyn (2003, p.141), one of the meanings of AWAY is "gradual and continuously growing distance". A second meaning associated with AWAY is "a sense that some event is ongoing and continuing along as planned or

expected, but without any real endpoint or goal” (Rice 1999, p. 236). Exploration of the EMAS corpus revealed that Malaysian ESL learners creatively made up some non-idiomatic forms like WALK AWAY, CARRY AWAY, PUSH AWAY and SWISH AWAY and a few idiomatic forms like CHIRP AWAY, LAUGH AWAY and SCREAM AWAY. While there are no entries for these combinations in the reference dictionaries, there are analogous forms in the language such as THROW AWAY, TAKE AWAY, CHAT AWAY and CALL AWAY that have probably informed these new creations. These forms have more than five frequency hits in the BNC each and are acceptable to the native speakers. The appearance of such forms in the BNC attests to their acceptability, hence an aspect of creativity. It is, however, necessary to point out that overgeneralization of such a pattern misled the learners into forging some wrong forms like END AWAY. The learners making such deviant combinations were in fact negligent of the notion that END is a prompt verb of non-continuous nature, hence not combinable with AWAY with aspectual continuation.

Occurrence of phrasal verb combinations with the particle AROUND in the EMAS was another indication of ESL learners’ creative use of phrasal verbs. In some combinations AROUND is used to convey the notion of “aimlessness” (Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs) or in Dehe and Wanner’s words (2001 p. 131) “the pejorative, durative sense ‘aimlessly, without achieving anything’”. Although the learners’ creation of such idiomatic combinations as JOKE AROUND and SEARCH AROUND turned out to be few and far between, they, nevertheless, appeared to have felt more at ease with making combinations of AROUND with its literal meaning ‘moving in a circle’. They successfully produced a large number of phrasal verbs with AROUND expressing the latter meaning exemplified by forms like RUN AROUND, WALK AROUND. Their attempt to use AROUND with idiomatic meanings, however, ended up forging some unacceptable forms like OPEN AROUND, LAUGH AROUND, SHOUT AROUND and many others. Data from the BNC show that most of these verbs combine more naturally with AWAY to express the intended meanings.

Despite the learners’ creative use of literal phrasal verbs, they turned out to run into creating unacceptable forms with particles conveying aspectual or idiomatic meanings. Use of such forms is one indication of “unnaturalness or foreign-soundingness” (Granger 1996, p.17) in the ESL language. While OUT “contributes a connotation of thoroughness and culmination” (Live 1965, p. 436) as in WORK OUT and WEAR OUT, learners analogically coined some new forms which are truly non-English. Instances of USE OUT for USE UP, TEAR OUT for TEAR DOWN, etc. are non-English combinations forged based on the existing patterns. The learners appeared to be aware of the general meanings of the verbs that fit the situation; they were, nevertheless, unaware of the idiomatic meanings created due to the use of wrong particle, giving away the combinations as deviations from Standard English.

In a similar way, learners created a number of combinations that seem to be possible in the language though not likely to occur, and this is where the question of unnaturalness is raised. For example, creation of units like STATE OUT, SAY OUT, and VOICE OUT based on such existing forms as SPEAK OUT and SHOUT OUT is evidently indicative of unnatural language use. Sinclair (1997) holds that an issue in the acceptability of new utterances in any language has to do perhaps more with what is probable than what is possible. The problem with the forged combinations with OUT is that they have no entry in the reference dictionaries, no frequency of occurrence in the BNC and are categorically unacceptable to native speakers, hence improbable though they might appear as possible. Despite the fact that grammar allows for the creation of these and many other similar combinations, these possibilities are, nevertheless, banned due to some restrictions acknowledged by the native speakers. Learners’ negligence of restrictions to the verbs to

combine with OUT, in one way or another, accounts for the production of such unacceptable forms and a few others like ENJOY OUT, SPEND OUT, USE OUT, etc. It is interesting to add that ignorance of rule restrictions has been mentioned as the most influential factor affecting Malaysian learners' inappropriate production of collocations in writing (Hong, Rahim, Tan & Salhuddin 2011).

In addition to producing unacceptable combinations, learners also made use of some common phrasal verbs but with meanings not attested by any dictionaries, showing deviations from natural use. To exemplify the point, while PULL OUT, BREAK OUT, COME OUT, PICK UP and TAKE OUT are all common and accepted forms with high frequency rates in the BNC; learners, however, used them with NPs they are not usually associated with. For instance, PULL OUT flower, BREAK OUT the world record, COME OUT the idea, PICK UP fruit, TAKE OUT clothes and many other similar strings would probably never be produced by native speakers.

Another instance of unusual use of phrasal verbs occurred with the particle DOWN accompanied by verbs of motion like GO, COME and HEAD. Although these combinations are quite common with and acceptable to the native speakers, the semantic meaning associated with DOWN was not cared for by the ESL learners. DOWN is usually used to indicate a downward movement or a movement from the north to the south; such a meaning was, however, not intended by the learner as shown by the contexts like 'HEAD DOWN to kitchen, GO DOWN to kitchen, COME DOWN to house, etc. In a similar way, a number of combinations with the particle DOWN have been made with no care for the semantic meanings associated with the lexical verbs. To exemplify the point, 'He LET DOWN in water', 'GO DOWN in the water', and 'GET DOWN in river' were all repeatedly used in place of FALL DOWN by different learners. The lexical verbs in these combinations usually feature some purposeful action, but the situations described by these combinations in the corpus showed just an accident without any intention on the part of the subject.

UP is no doubt the most frequent and productive particle in English. Spatially speaking, UP as an adverb conveys "motion from a lower to a higher place". As a real particle, it suggests the sense of "completeness or thoroughness" (Lindstromberg 1997, p. 24). In a similar way, Fraser (1976, p. 15) quotes Whorf (1956) that the particle UP in combinations like EAT UP, COVER UP, etc. means "completely, to a finish". Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman refer to these combinations as "completive phrasal verbs" (1999, p. 433). ESL learners proved to have no problem with creating new combinations in which UP is compositional, showing movement "towards a higher position" as in PULL her UP, BRING him UP, etc. However, the idiomatic forms made with UP are simple deviations from the natural use. For instance, combinations SPEND UP, PICK UP, PLUCK UP and RESCUE UP as used in the corpus are revealing of unnaturalness in learner language. The intended meanings can be better expressed with the lexical verb alone.

The last aspect contributing to the unnaturalness of the learner language has to do with the overuse of phrasal verbs as a general category and the overrepresentation of infrequent forms in the BNC. While phrasal verbs as a general category have been reported to occur roughly once per one hundred and fifty tokens in natural language use (Gardner & Davies 2007), they were unusually repeated in the corpus, happening about once per twelve tokens. In a similar way, about half of the top frequent forms in the EMAS are not listed among the one hundred highly frequent forms in the BNC. Forms like FALL DOWN, PULL UP, RUN AWAY, etc. are only a few of the unusually repetitive forms in the corpus.

To sum up, even though the retrieval of the meaning of unnatural combinations causes no difficulty to native speakers, such deviations give away the production as

foreignness. Therefore, knowledge of frequency of use and arbitrary restriction on the use of phrasal verbs is required in order for the second language learner to conform to the norms of the natural use of the language.

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian ESL learners showed a great tendency towards both making up and using phrasal verbs in their language production perhaps “to avoid the criticism of 'talking like a book'” (Jowett 1951, p. 156). While some forms were created based on the existing patterns, and hence indicative of creativity, some were, in fact, deviations both lexically and semantically. As far as non-idiomatic combinations are involved, these creations appeared to be almost error free; learners’ attempt to come up with new idiomatic forms was, nevertheless, to a great extent prone to error. Creation of unacceptable forms such as USE OUT, VOICE OUT, and SAY OUT are only a few examples. It seems that the English language tends to keep the mystery of creating new idiomatic phrasal verbs hidden from the non-native speakers. That the learners proved to have more problems with the correct selection of particles than with the verbal elements suggests that, in the presentation and teaching of phrasal verbs, textbook writers and teachers as well should give more weight to distinguishing different semantic functions associated with each single particle and the way they combine with various lexical verbs. Care, however, should be exercised that not all possible access to phrasal verbs depends on linguistic analysis. As Claridge (2000) observes, there is no fixed system or a one-to-one correspondence between particle elements and the aspectual meaning(s) they carry. For instance, use of particle UP in GIVE UP is not informed by any of the aspectual interpretations suggested by Bolinger (1971).

Despite the theoretical evidence and the wide range of experimental studies attesting the underuse of phrasal verbs by non-native speakers, the Malaysian ESL learning context seems to counteract the effects of the differences between L1 and L2. Yet, there are some complicated features to the English phrasal verbs that tend to be problematic for nonnative speakers to grasp. Just because it is practically impossible for materials developers and teachers to present everything about phrasal verb combinations to language learners, attempts should be focused on difficult areas that are likely to create problems for learners. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), difficulties arise ‘when forms are exceptions to paradigms . . . , when the linguistic behavior of forms defies easy generalizations (p. 10). One such area could be the use of items with aspectual and idiomatic meanings. However, as Claridge (2000) holds, “Idiomaticity, after all, does not emerge out of nowhere, but is based in some way or other on the regular patterns of the language” (p. 47). To exemplify the point, verbs indicating the idea of ‘division’ like ‘DIVIDE, CHOP, SLICE, SPLIT’ usually tend to combine with ‘UP’. Although these forms are all idiomatic, they seem to follow a systematic pattern. Therefore, ELT materials and structured input activities, if effectively designed, can lead to creativity and natural use of these combinations among non-native language learners.

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