Particles in Common: Mastery of Advanced EFL Learners over the Phrasal Verbs

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Abstract: Phrasal verbs are considered as one of the most important, although difficult, feature of English language. They are supposed to have the capability of distinguishing a native and a non-native speaker. This paper investigates the impact of classified phrasal verbs' list containing particles in common on the effective use of phrasal verbs in advanced learners of English. Accordingly, it aims to find a more thorough way to facilitate phrasal verbs' practical learning. To reach the goal of the paper, 30 EFL learners who signed up for IELTS courses were chosen, and divided into two groups. The study is designed based on an experiment suggesting that the phrasal verbs are not as problematic as they were portrayed in general, at least for the advanced learners. Concerning the utilization of phrasal verbs, the result indicates that the learners in the experimental group, who were exposed to the phrasal verbs with the use of classified list, had better performance than those in control group exposed to unclassified lists.

Key Words: EFL learners, phrasal verbs, classified lists of particles.

1. Introduction

"Multi-word units", 'lexical phrases', 'chunks', and 'prefabs' are some of the favored terms utilized by scholars to refer to different types of word-combination. Erman and Warren (2000) stated that multi-word items (exist in) account for 58.6 per cent of spoken English and 52.3 per cent of written English. Jackendoff (1995) believed that the number of different multi-word items existed in the lexicon may be more than the number of individual words. Psycholinguists and cognitive linguists (Newell 1990; Skehan, 1992) reach a consensus that the human beings' mental lexicon puts the process of memorization of lexical units and 'chunking' together and this simultaneous operation is the key factor for best attaining the objective of vocabulary learning.

Taking language learning into consideration, Schmitt (2000) remarks that, 'language ability requires not only the ability to produce language through syntactic generation (via grammatical competence), but also the ability to use lexical chunks' (p. 111). In other words, to be a fluent target language speaker, learners have to be able for both language producing and lexical chunks' use. Thus, the result makes the EFL teachers responsible to include instruction on multi-word units in the teaching curriculum.

It has always been asserted that one of the most overwhelming challenges the English learners face concerns phrasal verbs. This difficulty is sometimes so demanding that even the most fluent non-native speakers can easily be distinguished from the native speakers just through observing their phrasal verb use. Thus, there is no doubt that these kinds of verbs are reflected to be an important feature of the English language and the one which confronts the learner with great difficulty. The number of phrasal verbs is expanded enough to necessitate the existence of dictionaries dedicated to them. Many linguists and grammarians have written about the phrasal verbs, going through the details of their semantic and syntactic features to uncover the real nature of them, so that it could be possible for the educational material developers to single a special treatment out. This in itself has caused fierce controversy ever since they are taken into the consideration by scholars.

In order to refer to this particular form of language numerous terms have been taken into account, such as 'separable verb' (Francis 1958), 'two-word verb' (Siyanova& Schmitt 2007), and 'verb-particle combinations' (Fraser 1974). However, in this study the term 'phrasal verb' will be used, since it is the most wide-ranging term referred to by researchers of this language attribute (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). Furthermore, considering this area, the term 'phrasal verb' is commonly used in the teaching and learning setting including reference materials (e.g. learners' textbooks, course books, dictionaries).

The productivity of English phrasal verbs has varied widely over the centuries, but the number and usage of them has been shot up remarkably since late 1990s. This development has been most notable in American English (McArthur, 1992, p. 775). However, it is obvious that phrasal verbs, particularly those commonly used ones, are of the most significant components in effectively spoken language no matter in what kind of context it is. Therefore, they are supposed as ubiquitous feature of English language that the EFL learners encounter them from the very beginning. The EFL course book series present the easiest, and the most useful ones at the time, in the fundamental level of the series; for example *Get up, take off, get on with,* etc. would surely exist in the vocabulary list of any beginners course book.

Recently, learning multiword lexical items in second/foreign language acquisition has attracted the attention of many researchers (Folse, 2004; Laufer, 1997). Phrasal verbs in English are no exception among the multiword units being focused on by them. English phrasal verbs consist of a verb paired with a particle that is homophonous with an English preposition (Jackendoff, 2010, p. 228). Although the particle used in the phrasal verb seems to be a preposition in the first glance, it is completely different with it in nature. The particle is semantically attached to the verb to make its meaning significantly different than when the verb is presented by its own.   There are ways to distinguish preposition with particles. For instance, considering prosodic, stress is placed on both parts of the phrasal verb construction, rather than only on the verb, specifically in non-separable phrasal verbs (Master, 1996).

Yet, the English phrasal verb is not simply the product of blending the root verb and the particle into a single word. Although the phrasal verb can be used in the same way as a single-word English verb, there are some other structural options exist for this construction. The particle can be placed after the verb's object; that is; it is possible for the particle to be separate from the verb which is semantically connected to. Naturally, this movement is only feasible in transitive sentences. Simply put, this construction cannot occur for some phrasal verbs, if so it is considered ungrammatical. For those verbs which match this construction, the alternative word order is required when the object of the sentence is a pronoun (Curzan & Adams, 2006, p. 148). Furthermore, the meaning of many phrasal verbs is not easy to comprehend, and it may be impossible to be interpreted by combining the meaning of each parts. These kind of phrasal verbs are thought to be idiomatic. Some common examples of idiomatic phrasal verbs are *chew out, tune out, catch up,* and *put off* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Schmitt &Siyanova, 2007).

Although this paper is not aiming at debating the essence of phrasal verbs, it would seem not irrelevant to reflect on what a learner of English may be confronted with when struggling to understand what a phrasal verb is.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the brief literature presented above about phrasal verbs, it appears that previous research focused on general issues and methodologies regarding learning/teaching phrasal verbs. However, despite research discussing the significant role of phrasal verbs in a simulated native-like English speaker, it seems that this particular language form is still neglected even in advance levels of English courses while it may be advantageous for learners in this level more than others. To fill this gap, the following research question was examined in this paper:

RQ. To what extent can the classification of particles help the advanced EFL learners to increase their use of phrasal verbs in speaking?

2. Review of the Related Literature

Phrasal verbs are defined in various ways in dictionaries and learners course books. One broad definition of phrasal verbs was proposed by Moon and Sinclair (1989) as "combinations of verbs with adverbial or prepositional particles" (p. IV). A more restricted definition stated by Cornell (1985) defined phrasal verbs in a more restricted manner as verbs which are taking adverb particles.   Bowen and his colleagues (1985) state that, the phrasal verb is made out of a content word and one or more particles.

Generally, phrasal verbs are defined as a combination of two lexical elements: a root verb and a particle. Yet, concerning the nature of phrasal verbs, researchers face arising problems particularly on the grammatical status of the particle in its construction: whether a particle must be an adverbial as in *look up,* or whether it could also include prepositions as in *look after*.

Cornell (1985) believed on the importance of phrasal verbs in comprehension and communication with native speakers since these verbs are of the key components of native speakers' spoken and informal written discourse. This belief is intensified by Fletcher's (2005) emphasis on the use of phrasal verbs in written texts because they are well suited to the formal discourse while expressing the ideas. He states that there is much evidence for the existence of phrasal verbs in formal occasions in which phrasal verbs make the discourse more appropriate and natural in expressing certain ideas.

Moreover, most phrasal verbs are metaphorical in meanings. Littlemore (2001) expresses that "metaphorical intelligence" has a vital role in all dimensions of communicative competence and should be placed properly in teaching and learning process, successfully. He notes that without good knowledge of phrasal verbs, the learners would not able to use the phrasal verbs appropriately and therefore they would not be fluent speakers of English.

-   **Semantic:**

Studying phrasal verbs as one of the most important of English language, many researchers (Machonis, 2009;   Davies, 2008; Schneider, 2004) consider the semantic points related to the phrasal verbs.
McArthur (1992) analyzed the particles typically come with the verbs. He states that these particles in English are homophonous with the prepositions, and these particles are often based on prepositions of location and direction. However, he notifies that not all English prepositions can appear in particle place.

Davis (2008) reports the Corpus of Contemporary American English [COCA] declaration that the particles *up, out, back, down, on, in, off, over, around,* and *about* are the ten most frequently used ones in English language (Davies, 2008).

Schneider (2004) says that some phrasal verbs are verb-particle combinations which are often semantically not transparent at all, and they seem to be strongly idiomatic. In line with his idea,   Machonis (2009) explains that many phrasal verbs come into the frames of idiomatic expression; that is, their meanings are not the synthesis of the root verb and the particle , but rather the root verb's meaning drastically changed.   Machonis (2009) calls these more idiomatic phrasal verbs "frozen verbs" (p. 253).

Providing a more comprehensive description of phrasal verbs Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) categorize this feature of language into three semantic categories: literal, idiomatic and aspectual. In literal phrasal verbs the meanings of the phrasal verb can be easily retrieved from   the ones of the root verband particle, setting aside. However, in idiomatic phrasal verbs the regular meanings of the root verb and particleseem to be lost and the two components do not preserve their usual meanings. Aspectual phrasal verbs, semantically, have meanings less transparent than those of the literal phrasal verbs while more transparent than those of idiomatic phrasal verbs. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) subdivided the aspectual phrasal verbs into "semantic classes depending on the semantic contribution of the particle" (p. 432).

-   **Syntax**

Mobility of the particle is one of the most attention-grabbing aspects of phrasal verbs for many scholars.One of the

more remarkable properties of phrasal verbs is considered to be the alternate word order of these verbs, since the structure of these constructions is based on Verb-Particle, each part as a semantic unit, there would syntactically remain no abnormality if the two segments bind into one compound word (Campbell, 2004). Of course, this scarce characteristic is not present in all phrasal verbs. While there are some non-separable phrasal verbs in which the two parts tend to be blended together, there also exist those which possess either optional or obligatory word order changes.

- **Difficulties with phrasal verbs**

According to what have been done and available literature on the study of the phrasal verbs, it is generally concluded that phrasal verb is one of the challenging areas for ESL/EFL learners, and they prefer to use one-word verbs rather than the phrasal verbs. Following, the results of studies and experiments done by some interested scholars in this topic will be presented briefly.

English native speakers tend to use phrasal verbs in their everyday conversation and generally set aside the equivalent one-word verbs for more formal discourse such as business letters, or other official occasions (Brown, 2004). A considerable amount of literature has recorded phrasal verbs as a problematic area for ESL/EFL learning. It is believed that, although English native speakers have no difficulty with them, the learners of English as a second/foreign language find them not only convoluted and problematic to learn, but also hard to memorize. Putting the phrasal verbs in the sequence of language learning, considering the difficulties pointing above, the EFL learners have the tendency to prevent using them in their language producing. Liao and Fukuya (2004) concluded that as the result of complicated nature of phrasal verbs, the teaching approaches used to present them to the learners, may cause a large amount of difficulty in dealing with phrasal verbs.

Brown (2004) states that, the learners' problems with phrasal verbs fork off in three branches. First, complete numbers: there are over 4,000 phrasal verbs found everywhere in the written and spoken forms, and the formal and informal discourse of British, American and Australian English. To comprehend and produce English well, it is essential to have mastery over the most common of these verbs. A second reason is the idiomatic nature of most phrasal verbs in which the individual word have different meaning from the one in their combination form. Wallace (1982) explains a phrasal verb as a verb and a preposition or an adverb creating a meaning different from the original verb.

Moreover, Nation (2001) asserts that the avoidance of English phrasal verbs which has always challenged the learners is due to many factors among which the absence of permanent English language environment is supposed to be the most noteworthy. Nearly all English learners are just exposed to the English language in some fake situations in the classroom. Besides, they face lack of opportunity in real community to use those words learnt in the classroom.

3. Methodology

To answer the question concerning the probable effects of particles' classification on the learners' utilization of the phrasal verbs, an experiment had to be conducted, and quantitative measures to collect data were required. This study needed an experimental design, with pre-test and post-test (oral) measurements, and participants' growth comparison. There were two variables in this study– independent and dependent. The independent variable was the use of particles' classification for teaching the new phrasal verbs in the EFL classroom. The dependent variable ,on the other hand, was participants' use of those phrasal verbs in their speaking. The experiment investigated whether the independent variable would bring about any changes in the dependent variable; that is whether the classification of the particles would facilitate and enhance learning and, therefore, boost the use of phrasal verbs.

3.1 Participants

The population from which the participants were selected included the learners of a credible institute in Shiraz, Iran, who had enrolled in IELTS classes in the Spring semester in 2015. As a policy of the institute, and in order to make sure all of the candidates were proficient enough for taking part in IELTS classes, the institute administered a two-phase placement test- written and oral. It is worth noticing that the oral form has been of a great importance in this paper. Thus, all the learners participating in these classes were certainly at the same level of target language proficiency. The rationale was to have a

sample which was representative of the advanced EFL learners' population. Of course, the underlying intention of having the subjects from the same level of proficiency was to leave no doubts that the results would not be affected by differences in knowledge of the language. As a result and in preparation for the study, the total number of 30 students at the same advanced English proficiency level was randomly assigned into 2 groups, 15 learners in each.

3.2 Materials

In order to expose the EFL learners to the phrasal verbs in line with the aim of the study, they were prepared with lists of phrasal verbs containing the particles *in, on, out, down, away*. Each list included 8 phrasal verbs which were similar in particles. While designing these lists, it was attempted to choose the phrasal verbs with the capability of being used in the related topics of their textbooks, ultimately. It is of great importance to mention that the learners in Control group were exposed to the list of the same phrasal verbs, but not in the classified manner.

3.3 Procedure

As it was mentioned before, the EFL learners had to take part in the oral placement test. The process of going through the interview is the standard one done in that institute; that is evaluating accuracy, fluency, vocabulary use and pronunciation. However, to answer this paper's research question the other facet, which was the density of phrasal verbs in their speaking, was taken into consideration. In order not to disturb the interviewer's on the factors of typical evaluation of the institute, a colleague was invited to be there and just counted and recorded the number of phrasal verbs use.

It was discussed with the department management of the institute to have permission to allocate 10 minutes of each session for exposing the EFL learners to the prepared lists of phrasal verbs, more than what they had in their course books, and working on them. The main part of the procedure began from the second session. Every other session, the learners were provided with a list of phrasal verbs with one specific particle. The verbs were taught and elaborated while using tangible examples. Then, the learners were assigned to get prepared for a short lecture on a topic of their own interest including some of the phrasal verbs they were exposed to, so far. The next session, two or three learners presented their lectures. This procedure continued till covering the last list.

At the end of the semester, the other oral test was administered on the same way with the first one, and the number of phrasal verbs in their language production were counted and recorded to be compared with their performance in the beginning of the semester through the process of data analysis.

4. Results and Data Analysis

The number of phrasal verbs used by participants was recorded to be analyzed. In order to analyze the data, quantitative data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package of the Social and Science (SPSS) 22. The raw data obtained from the pre-interview and post-interview were submitted to SPSS program and the subsequent computation were made.

To gain primary information such as mean, maximum, minimum amount an standard deviation (presented in Table 1) a descriptive statistics were used.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Scores

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	Pre-interview	15	.00	4.00	2.0000	1.25357
	Post-interview	15	1.00	6.00	3.6000	1.50238
Experimental	Pre-interview	15	.00	4.00	1.8000	1.26491
	Post-interview	15	3.00	9.00	6.6000	1.88225

Along with the descriptive analysis and to go through the process of inferential statistics Kolomogrov-Smirnov test was used to obtain normality and non-normality of the data distribution.

The statistic degree of the test is based on Z statistic. As it is shown in Table 2, p-value for the post-interview in control group is less than 0.05. So it should be considered as the non-normal sample, while the others are normal.

Table 2

Tests of Normality of Pre- and Post-Interviews

	Control		Experimental	
	Pre-interview	Post-interview	Pre-interview	Post-interview
Statistic	.167	.224	.163	.171
Sig.	.200	.041	.200	.200

To compare the frequency of the phrasal verbs used in both groups' pre-interview, and to find out whether all the participants were in the same level before conducting the experiment, t-test was operated. Since the p-value is more than 0.05 (T=0.435, df=28, α=0.05, p=0.667), it is concluded that the frequency of phrasal verbs used by the IELTS candidates in their pre-interview was in the same level.

Table 3

Independent Samples Test for Pre-interviews in Both Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	.158	.694	.435	28	.667	.20000

The main objective of this paper is to stumble on the effectiveness of exposing advanced EFL learners of English to the classified lists of phrasal verbs containing the particles in common, and its priority over the typical way exposing learners to this important feature of language.

To reach the goal, the data recorded from the post-interview in both groups is analyzed. Since the distribution of scores in control group's post-interview is not normal, Mann-Whitney U test is used to compute and compare the raw data in the control and experimental group. Table 4 presented this computation in detail.

Table 4

Ranks and Test Statistics for Post-Interviews in Both Groups

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Control	15	9.63	144.50
Experimental	15	21.37	320.50
Total	30		
Mann-Whitney U			24.500
Z			-3.695
Asymp. Sig.			.000

The "Mann-Whitney U" value is 24.5 with the significant level of 0.000 which is less than α. That is, there is a significant difference between the participants' performance in these two groups, and based on comparing the mean rank in control and experimental group, it is clearly seen that experimental group learners have got a more favorable and higher result

than the control group learners. The findings revealed that the large frequency of phrasal verbs in the post-interview applied by the learners in the experimental group was a sequel to the classification of the phrasal verbs based on the similarity of particles that has been exposed to them.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The present study has investigated the effect of particle classification in learning phrasal verbs in advanced EFL learners. This method acted like a strategy for learning phrasal verbs, and the learners participated in this study seemed to be interested in them. As far as the advanced, IELTS candidates, learners were concerned in this paper; they knew that the use of phrasal verbs in their speaking section of the IELTS exam can bring them score since it makes them a native-like speaker.

Comparing the result of this paper with the one written by Norman (2010), it is concluded that although the lists of the phrasal verbs having root verbs in common made the learners confused (Norman, 2010), the lists of phrasal verbs similar in particles facilitate the learning of this component of English language, since it helps the learners compare and contrast the way one particle change the meaning of the root verbs.

One important approach in learning phrasal verbs is contextualization which was approved in this paper, Dainty (1992) believes that contextualization provide the learners the opportunity to comprehend the meaning of a phrasal verb even though they see it for the first time. Moreover, Thornbury (2002) states that "phrasal verbs should be presented in short contexts that demonstrate their syntactic behavior". In this paper, it was attempted to follow this approach, but not in a typical direction of applying contextualization done in most studies. This approach is mostly carried out by the active performance of teachers. However, in this study, the teacher just brought simple examples to make the meaning of phrasal verb clear for the learners, and make the students go about the contextualization the next day voluntarily; that is, a calm atmosphere was created for them to use the language and the phrasal verbs in the contexts made by their own. The findings reveal that the active presence of the learners in this process results in the better understanding, and therefore particle use of the phrasal verbs. This findings also confirm Mark's (2005) claim which says that the non-use of phrasal verbs should not be interpreted as the avoidance rather it may be due to the passive learning process for comprehension.

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