

THE AVOIDANCE OF USING ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS BY EFL SAUDI LEARNERS

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ملخص:

درس البحث تجنب الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية من قبل المتعلمين السعوديين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم إعطاء اختبار يحتوي على خمسة عشرة محادثة قصيرة، ينقص كل محادثة فعل لتكتمل. طُلب من ثلاثين متعلم سعودي للغة الإنجليزية (١٥ من السنة الأولى، و ١٥ من السنة الثالثة في الجامعة) إكمال الفراغات بالأفعال المتاحة في أربعة خيارات متعددة: فعل مركب صحيح، فعل من كلمة واحدة صحيح، وفعل مركب خاطيء وفعل من كلمة واحدة خاطيء. تم أيضاً إعطاء نفس الاختبار لعينة من ستة مدرسين متحدثين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أم للمقارنة. وجد البحث أن المتعلمين السعوديين تجنبوا الأفعال المركبة المجازية، لكن استخدموا الأفعال المركبة الحرفية مثل ما استخدمها المتحدثون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أم. لم يوجد هناك اختلاف بين المتعلمين في السنة الأولى والسنة الثالثة، مما يشير إلى أن عدد سنوات التعلم للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لا يؤثر في تجنب واستخدام الأفعال الإنجليزية المركبة. كلمات مفتاحية: الأفعال المركبة، اللغة الإنجليزية، المتعلمون السعوديون، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Abstract:

This paper reports on a study conducted to examine the avoidance of using English phrasal verbs by Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). It also examined the effect of phrasal verb types (literal vs. figurative) and years of learning English in a foreign language setting on the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners. A number of Saudi EFL learners (n = 30; two groups: 1st year and 3rd year) were recruited to take a phrasal verb multiple-choice test. 6 native English speakers were also recruited to take the same test to provide a comparison group. The results showed that both learner groups used much less figurative phrasal verbs than did the native English group. However, the learner groups were found similar to the native group in using literal phrasal verbs. There was no effect for the years of learning English on the use or avoidance of phrasal verbs, as both learner groups were found similar in their use of phrasal verbs.

Keywords: Phrasal verbs, Saudi learners, Learning English as a Second Language.

1. Introduction:

One of the distinctive features of English vocabulary is the existence of phrasal verbs. A phrasal verb is a combination of a verb proper and a particle (adverb or preposition) which semantically functions as a single unit (e.g., *show off*) (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). In many cases, the meaning of a phrasal verb cannot be predicted from the meaning of the individual words that make them up. The use of phrasal verbs is very common in spoken English among native speakers, and it is an indication of idiomaticity (Kamarudin, 2014). Nonnative learners of English usually find difficulty in using and understanding English phrasal verbs (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). Although many studies have examined the use of phrasal verbs among learners of English (e.g., Dagut & Laufer, 1985, Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, Liao & Fukuya, 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007), further research is still needed to find out how nonnative speakers from various linguistic backgrounds avoid or use phrasal verbs. The current study examines the

avoidance of phrasal verbs by Saudi learners of English, and whether learning experience, operationalized as the number of years learning English, affect their avoidance of phrasal verbs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Phrasal Verbs in English and Arabic

The use of phrasal verbs is very common in English, especially in informal and spoken English. In English, phrasal verbs consist of a verb and a particle, which can be an adverb or a preposition. Dagut and Laufer (1985, p. 74) classified phrasal verbs according to their meanings into three types: 1) literal (their meanings can be predicted from the meanings of the individual words that make them up, such as *come in*), 2) figurative (their meanings cannot be directly related to the meanings of the individual words that make them up, such as *let down*), and 3) completive (the particle indicates the action, such as *sit down*). Laufer and Eliasson (1993) provided similar classification of phrasal verbs but used different terms. They used the terms *semantically transparent* to refer to literal

phrasal verbs, and *semantically opaque* to refer to figurative phrasal verbs. In the current study, we adopt the categorization and terminology developed by Dagut and Laufer (1985) (i.e., literal & figurative).

In Arabic, the existence and the status of phrasal verbs are not as clear as it is in English. In fact, there is still a debate on whether phrasal verbs do exist in Arabic (Aldaresh, 2008). This is partly due to the dearth of research that examines multi-word verbs in Arabic. In this research, we adopt the viewpoint of Aldaresh (2008) in which he argues that phrasal verbs do exist in Arabic. However, he outlines some ways in which Arabic phrasal verbs (APVs) are different from English phrasal verbs (EPVs).

1. Unlike EPVs which are of three types (i.e., verb + adverb, verb + preposition, and verb + adverb + preposition), APVs are of one type only, that is, verb + preposition.
2. Unlike EPVs, whose communicative function is mainly carried by particles (Side, 1990), the communicative function of APVs is typically carried by the verb in spite of the fact that the preposition modifies the meaning of the verb it combines with.
3. Unlike EPVs which are less formal, less rhetorical and commonly used orally by everyone in everyday contexts, APVs are far more formal and highly rhetorical (Aldaresh, 2008, p.89).

2.2 English phrasal verbs and English language learners

English language learners usually face difficulty with phrasal verbs, and avoid using them in their production (e.g., Dagut & Laufer, 1985, Liao & Fukuya, 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). This difficulty is usually a result of the learners not being able to recognize that phrasal verbs, though multi-word verbs, function as single semantic units, and their meanings cannot always be predicted from the words that make them up (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007).

This is particularly the case where learners' native language does not have similar constructions to phrasal verbs.

Many studies have examined the use of phrasal verbs by English language learners (e.g., Dagut & Laufer, 1985, Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, Liao & Fukuya, 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). Avoidance has been a central theme in previous research on the use of phrasal verbs by nonnative English speakers. Schachter (1974, p. 213) pointed out that learners consistently avoid using some language structures in their production, and this avoidance, as well as learners' actual production, should be of importance to second and foreign language research. A number of researchers have subsequently examined the avoidance of using phrasal verbs by non-native English learners from various L1 backgrounds (Dagut & Laufer, 1985, Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, Liao & Fukuya, 2004, Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007, AbdulRahman & Abid, 2014, El-Dakhs, 2015).

Dagut and Laufer (1985) showed that Hebrew learners of English did avoid using phrasal verbs, and they attributed this avoidance to the non-existence of phrasal verbs in Hebrew. Laufer and Eliasson (1993) examined the use of phrasal verbs by Swedish learners of English, and found that the learners did not avoid using phrasal verbs. They also compared the Swedish learners' performance with that of a group of Hebrew learners, and found that the Swedish learners used significantly more phrasal verbs than did the Hebrew learners. They attributed their results to the fact that phrasal verbs exist in Swedish, but not in Hebrew. Liao and Fukuya (2004) studied the avoidance of phrasal verbs among Chinese learners of English who were of two groups: intermediate and advanced. They showed that both groups used fewer phrasal verbs than did their native English participants, and the intermediate group used fewer phrasal verbs than did the advanced group. They also found that both learner groups used figurative phrasal verbs

less often than literal phrasal verbs. The authors attributed the Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs to the structural difference between the learners' L1 and L2, and to the inherent difficulty of figurative phrasal verbs. Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) examined the use of English phrasal verbs by native and highly-proficient nonnative English speakers, who were native speakers of non-Germanic languages (the existence of phrasal verbs is a characteristic of Germanic languages). The results showed that the non-native speakers tended to use significantly less phrasal verbs than did the native English speakers. Unlike Liao and Fukuya (2004), their study did not find any effect of L2 exposure on the amount of phrasal verbs used by their non-native participants. They attributed this difference to the fact that the intermediate-level learners in the study of Liao and Fukuya (2004) had no exposure to native English (i.e., did not live in an English speaking country).

AbdulRahman and Abid (2014) and El-Dakhs (2015) investigated the use of English phrasal verbs by Arab EFL learners. AbdulRahman and Abid (2014) examined the use of English phrasal verbs in the writings of Omani learners of English. Their results showed the rarity of using phrasal verbs in writing by Omani learners. El-Dakhs (2015) studied the use of English phrasal verbs by Egyptian learners who were undergraduate students studying at a private university in Egypt in which the medium for teaching was English. Similar to AbdulRahman and Abid (2014), the learners were found to use limited phrasal verbs in their production. Both studies categorized the learners according to the years in which they studied at the university to find out whether experience had any effect on their use of phrasal verbs, and it was found that learners in higher levels used more phrasal verbs than did learners in lower levels. The current study aims to extend the investigation to another context, Saudi learners of English as a foreign language.

3. Research Questions

1. Do Saudi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) avoid using phrasal verbs?
2. Does the type of phrasal verb (literal vs. figurative) has an effect on their avoidance of phrasal verbs, if any?
3. Do years of experience in studying English in an EFL setting affect their avoidance of using English phrasal verbs?

3. Methodology

The present study was conducted to examine whether EFL Saudi learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs when given the option to choose between a phrasal verb and a one-word equivalent. Its focus was on written language due to anticipated methodological issues involved in gathering and processing large data of spoken language. Furthermore, it followed a test design that was cross-sectional. Cross-sectional test was preferred because of quick data collection at one point in time and prompt obtainment of results through statistical analysis.

3.1 Participants

Two groups of undergraduate Saudi EFL learners and a group of native speakers were selected from Taif University; they were 30 learners and 6 native speakers. All groups of EFL learners and the native speakers group belonged to Taif University. The sample was chosen randomly. The two groups of learners were English majors in the Foreign Languages Department at Taif University. They were all native speakers of Arabic in the age of 18 and above. The first group ($n=15$) belonged to the first year, and the second ($n=15$) to the third year in the Foreign Languages Department. The native speakers were working as English teachers in the English Language Center at the same university. They were chosen as a reference sample against which the Saudi learners' avoidance is measured.

3.2 Test and Procedure

The test is a multiple-choice test, adopted from Liao and Fukuya (2004), in which there are 15 items (see appendix at the end). Each item represents a short conversation with a

blank space which the learners need to fill in to complete the conversation by choosing from four options: two correct (one phrasal verb and one one-word equivalent) and two incorrect distractors (one phrasal verb and one word verb).

The test was administered to the beginner and advanced learners separately; in two different classes. The learners were given 15 minutes to fill in the blank spaces by choosing the appropriate verb most suitable to complete the conversation. They were not allowed to use dictionaries or to get help from their colleagues. The same test was also given to the native speakers at the English Language Centre following the same procedures.

4. Results

For each learner, a percentage of correct choices of phrasal verbs was calculated by dividing the number of correct phrasal verbs by (15) (the total number of sentences or possible phrasal verbs). In addition, for each learner, separate percentages were calculated for the correct choices of literal ($n=4$) and figurative ($n= 11$) phrasal verbs in proportion to the total number of all correct phrasal verbs in each type. Percentages for all learners in each group were then averaged to measure the mean percentage for each group. Table 4.2 below shows the results.

Table 4.2 Mean percentages of correct choices for all groups according to different types of phrasal verbs.

Group	All Phrasal Verbs	Literal Phrasal Verbs	Figurative Phrasal Verbs	One Word	Incorrect Choices
1 st year	34% (0.09)	53% (0.18)	28% (0.16)	52% (0.07)	12% (0.09)
3 rd year	38% (0.16)	56% (0.30)	32% (0.17)	54% (0.14)	0.07% (0.07)
Native	83% (0.12)	79% (0.24)	84% (0.11)	16% (0.13)	0%

*The numbers between brackets represent the standard deviations from the mean

Figure 4.1 below illustrates all the results graphically.

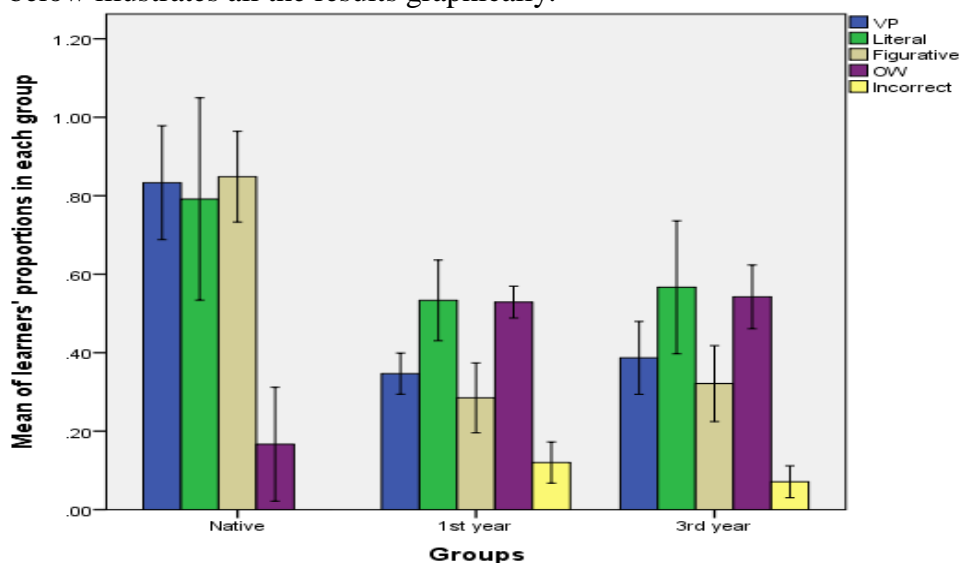


Figure 4.1 Mean percentages of learners' proportions in each group for all phrasal verbs (VP), literal phrasal verbs, figurative phrasal verbs, one word (OW), and incorrect choices (bars represent standard errors).

The results indicate a clear difference in the use of phrasal verbs between the learner groups and the native group. Generally, the native speakers used phrasal verbs much more frequently than did the Saudi learners. There seems to be no much difference between the two learner groups in using both types of phrasal verbs. Both learner groups used more literal phrasal verbs than figurative ones. This is probably because of the inherent ease to use literal phrasal verbs, as their meanings can be figured out from the meanings of the verbs that make them up.

To find out whether the groups differed significantly from each other in their use or avoidance of phrasal verbs, one-way ANOVAs were run for all phrasal verbs, literal phrasal verbs, and figurative phrasal verbs as dependent variables and group (1st year, 3rd year, and native) as an independent variable. Table 4.3 below shows the ANOVAs results. The level of significance was set at ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4.3. The ANOVAs results for the statistical differences between the three groups in their use of phrasal verbs.

Variable	df	F	Significance
All Phrasal Verbs	(2, 33)	29.55	0.01*
Literal Phrasal Verbs	(2, 33)	2.36	0.11
Figurative Phrasal Verbs	(2, 33)	29.08	0.01*

* Indicates a significant difference at ($p < 0.01$)

The ANOVAs results showed a significant main effect of using all phrasal verbs and figurative phrasal verbs. On the other hand, the results for the literal phrasal verbs did not show a significant main effect.

Games-Howell post hoc tests were run to examine pair-wise comparisons between the groups. The Games-Howell post hoc test was chosen because the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not met for some of the dependent variables, and because of the variance in sample size

between the native and the EFL groups. Table 4.4 below presents the results.

Table 4.4. Results for the Games-Howell post-hoc tests for pair-wise comparisons between all groups

Dependent Variable	Groups	Significance Level
All Phrasal Verbs	1 st year vs. 3 rd year	0.70
	1 st year vs. native	0.01*
	3 rd year vs. native	0.01*
Literal Phrasal Verbs	1 st year vs. 3 rd year	0.93
	1 st year vs. native	0.11
	3 rd year vs. native	0.22
Figurative Phrasal Verbs	1 st year vs. 3 rd year	0.82
	1 st year vs. native	0.01*
	3 rd year vs. native	0.01*

* Indicates a significant difference at $p < 0.01$.

The pair-wise post hoc tests showed that only for the figurative phrasal verbs the learner groups differed significantly from the native groups, which means that the native group used significantly more figurative phrasal verbs than did the learner groups. On the other hand, all groups were similar in their use of literal phrasal verbs. There seems to be no effect for the years spent learning English in an EFL setting on the use of phrasal verbs, as there was no significant differences between both learner groups (1st & 3rd years) in using phrasal verbs.

5. Discussion

The present study attempted to find out whether Saudi EFL learners avoided using phrasal verbs when presented with the choice to use either a phrasal verb or a one-word equivalent, and whether this avoidance, if any, is affected by the type of phrasal verbs (literal vs. figurative). It also attempted to find out whether the years of studying English in an EFL setting had any

effect on the avoidance or use of English phrasal verbs among Saudi EFL learners.

For the first part, the results showed that only for figurative phrasal verbs, the learner groups used significantly less phrasal verbs than did the native group. The learners' use of literal phrasal verbs, or in other words the lack of avoidance of literal phrasal verbs by the learner groups, can be attributed to the fact that the meaning of literal phrasal verbs can be predicted from the meanings of the words that make them up. This result is similar to the finding of Liao and Fukuya (2004) where both beginner and advanced Chinese learners of English were found to use significantly less figurative phrasal verbs than did native English speakers. It is also similar to the findings of previous studies that examined the use of phrasal verbs by Omani and Egyptian learners (AbdulRahman & Abid, 2014; El-Dakhs, 2015). Liao and Fukuya (2004) attributed their results to the inherent difficulty of figurative phrasal verbs, and to the structural differences between the learners' L1 and L2 with regard to phrasal verbs. Laufer and Eliasson (1993) also attributed the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Hebrew learners of English to the fact that Hebrew does not have phrasal verbs. For the current study, it is difficult to attribute the Saudi learners' avoidance of using figurative phrasal verbs to the structural differences between English and Arabic, as the status of phrasal verbs in Arabic is not clear (see the literature review section). However, one can argue that the use of phrasal verbs in Arabic is not as clear and ubiquitous as it is in English. In addition, the use of phrasal verbs in Arabic is formal and highly rhetorical (Aldahesh, 2008). For this reason, the avoidance of phrasal verbs can also be attributed to the structural difference between Arabic colloquial varieties and English, as Arabic learners are likely to be affected by their colloquial varieties than Standard Arabic when using second or foreign languages (Broselow, 1983). Further

research is much needed to examine the status of phrasal verbs in Arabic.

For the second part which examined the effect of the number of years learning English on the use or avoidance of phrasal verbs, the results showed no effect, as both learner groups were found to be similar in their use and avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs. A similar finding was mentioned in Siyanova and Schmitt (2007). However, this is different from the results of El-Dakhs (2015) where the advanced learners were found to use more phrasal verbs than the beginners. This may be attributed to the fact that the Saudi learners are not exposed to native English at the University, where most English language teachers are native speakers of Arabic (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007).

6. Conclusion

As the results clearly show an avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners, and given the importance of using phrasal verbs for idiomaticity in English, there seems to be a need to constantly present the learners with authentic native English materials in class, and not to rely heavily on written materials which contain far less phrasal verbs than spoken English (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). The learners may well also benefit from explicit teaching of figurative phrasal verbs in English.

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Appendix

For Questions 1 to 15, please **UNDERLINE** the letter of the answer you think most suitable to complete the dialogue.

لجميع الأسئلة من ١ إلى ١٥ الرجاء وضع خط تحت الإجابة الأنسب لتكملة المحادثة.

- 1- " When the weather is nice I love toearly."
- " Me too. It's good to enjoy the morning air."
A. rise B. release C. get up D. look after
- 2- " I didn't expect to see Emily at the party. I thought she had gone on vacation."
- " Me neither. I was also surprised when she "
A. claim B. appeared C. showed up D. looked up
- 3- "I heard that the company is sending you to Germany again."
- "Yes. It's been a long time since I was there, so I guess it's time to
my German."
A. abolish B. improve C. brush up on D. calm down
- 4- " How do you like John?"
- " He is one of those few people who never his friends."
A. solves B. disappoints C. lets down D. carries on
- 5- " Did you hear about the bombing of the embassy in Nairobi?"
- " That was a disaster. Fortunately, there weren't that many people in the building when the bomb "
A. went off B. tuned in C. exploded D. replied
- 6- " Hello, Jan!"
- "Hi Susan! How nice of you to call me!"
- "I want to ask for some advice."
- "No problem. Oh-, can you a second? Someone is knocking at the door."
A. hold on B. capture C. wait D. fall down

- 7- "Michelle sometimes forgets to the fire when she finishes cooking!"
- " That's dangerous! You should talk to her about this."
A. break into B. foresee C. put out D. extinguish
- 8- " I was late for my meeting last night, so I a story about a traffic jam."
- " But did your boss believe it at all? Better be frank next time."
A. invented B. made up C. followed D. lay down
- 9- " Robert and Paul were fighting on the street this morning."
- " So I heard. Was it serious? "
- " They didn't stop until Paul twisted his ankle and had to "
A. realize B. give in C. surrender D. look up to
- 10- " How is your business going?"
- " Pretty good, though I have to several good offers because I am just short of time."
A. offend B. turn down C. cheer up D. refuse
- 11- " When you think about it, most of your classmates will disappear from your life forever after you graduate."
- " Yeah, but every now and then you will one of them on the street."
A. go over B. run into C. meet D. applaud
- 12- " Do you notice that Marvin likes to ? "
- " Yes, but I don't think that he has anything to be proud of."
A. lie B. boast C. show off D. break out
- 13- " I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to say those things. I was just angry."
- " Just I don't want to see you for a while."
A. leave B. sit C. go away D. move on
- 14- (in a restaurant)
- " Miss, could I get some more coffee when you've got a chance? "
- "Sure. Would you like me to these plates first? "
A. remove B. take away C. mix D. drop in
- 15- "How do you get in the building? "
- " You have to the back door."
A. enter B. come in C. adopt D. put up