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UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS

Abstract

Learning phrasal verbs is significantly complicated by the fact that many phrasal verbs have multiple meanings (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 352) and that textbooks typically cover only a subset of these meanings (Zarifi and Mukundan, 2015: 793). Therefore, this research aims to determine whether the knowledge of specific meanings of English phrasal verbs among high school students at B2 level of English proficiency is influenced by the representation of phrasal verbs in textbooks. The main hypothesis posited was that students would have a better understanding of the meanings of phrasal verbs present in the textbooks compared to other meanings of the same phrasal verbs that were not covered in the textbooks. Furthermore, it was assumed that students with higher grades in English would achieve better results. The research results indicate that students are more familiar with the meanings of phrasal verbs that are addressed in textbooks, and that those with higher grades in English perform better, thereby confirming our both hypotheses.

Keywords: *English phrasal words, EFL, B2 level of English proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

Idioms, phrasal verbs, collocations, and other multiword lexical units constitute an important part of the English language, contributing substantively to its linguistic richness (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 339). The issue may be raised whether English language teachers around the world sufficiently underscore the significance of multiword lexicon acquisition in fostering learners' fluency. It is for this reason that, over the last two decades, an increasing number of researchers and teachers have shifted their focus from syntax to vocabulary in second language education. The interest in multiword structures has witnessed rapid growth, with particular emphasis placed on advancing discussions pertaining to key areas such as phrasal verbs (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 340).

In contemporary linguistic research, it is well-established that phrasal verbs constitute a particularly intricate segment of English lexis (White, 2012: 419). The acquisition of these verbs poses a significant challenge for learners of English as a foreign language, attributed in part to their ubiquity and generative nature within the language (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 340). The precise definition of phrasal verbs has long eluded linguists and grammarians, prompting ongoing debates and resulting in a lack of uniform agreement regarding their categorical delineation (White, 2012: 419). This ambiguity complicates the learning process for non-native English speakers, who often struggle to grasp and utilize phrasal verbs accurately. Consequently, it is unsurprising that numerous non-native speakers of English eschew the use of phrasal verbs (Liao and Fukuya, 2004: 194). This tendency has been substantiated by Liao and Fukuya (ibid), whose empirical investigation reveals that learners are apt to circumvent constructs they perceive as complex. Significantly, this phenomenon is not exclusive to speakers of languages devoid of phrasal verbs, but also extends to those whose native languages include them (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 340).

Building upon the previously mentioned observations, the current paper scrutinizes the comprehension of phrasal verbs among high school students for whom Bosnian is the mother tongue. It particularly delves into the diverse semantics of phrasal verbs and the extent to which these students grasp their multifaceted meanings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The linguistic construct 'phrasal verbs' is a nomenclature largely unique to the English language. Within the scope of English, this designation is not confined solely to phrasal verbs but is also applied to a broader category of verbal formations, which includes prepositional verbs (Thim, 2012: 2). For the purposes of this research, the term 'phrasal verbs' refers to structures 'that consist of a verb proper and a morphologically invariable particle functioning as a single unit both lexically and syntactically' (Liao and Fukuya, 2004: 196). Additionally, phrasal verbs can be conceptualized as verb-preposition combinations, where the resultant semantic implications are not predictably extrapolated from the individual semantic contributions of the verb and prepositions in isolation (Dixon, 1982: 1).

The interpretation of phrasal verbs varies considerably across different instances. Nonetheless, their meanings generally unfold through one of three principal mechanisms. Initially, certain phrasal verbs retain a semblance of the elemental verb's meaning, while the accompanying preposition assumes an atypical role. An illustrative case is 'eat up', which is semantically linked to 'eat', and 'slow down', analogous to 'slow'. Here, it is crucial to note that the prepositions 'up' and 'down' do not signify vertical movement relative to the earth's centre. In a second mode of interpretation, the preposition retains its conventional meaning, whereas the verb diverges from its original sense, such as 'knock around' does, implying travel in a casual manner. In the third and perhaps most confounding paradigm, the phrasal verb's meaning bears no clear relation to either the verb or preposition, yielding a completely distinct meaning, exemplified by the expression 'to put up with' (Dixon, 1982: 1). Regrettably, from the perspective of ESL/EFL learners, phrasal verbs more frequently bear idiomatic or metaphorical meanings that elude direct inference from the constituent verb or particle (Celce-Murcia, 2001: 254).

As multiword constructs, phrasal verbs encompass several constituent elements. Classification of phrasal verbs can be approached through various perspectives, one of which hinges on the number of particles involved. Thus, phrasal verbs may manifest as two-part verbs, comprised of a verb paired with a particle, such as 'look up'. Alternatively, they may extend to three-part constructs, encompassing a verb, particle and subsequent preposition, as exemplified by 'keep up with' (Celce-Murcia, 2001: 254).

Previous research

The complexity inherent in the meanings of phrasal verbs has long captured the attention of both linguists and educators. Gardner and Davies (2007) delve into the study of phrasal verbs using *The British National Corpus (BNC).* The data gathering process ''included dividing the

corpus into every possible two-, three-, four-, five-, six-, and seven-word chunk, with their accompanying grammatical tags'' (Gardner and Davies, 2007: 344). Subsequently, they meticulously identified instances where a lexical verb was followed by an adverbial particle. Further analysis involved lemmatizing the outcomes to aggregate all inflectional forms of the same verb. The data were then scrutinized based on their form and meaning, leading to the compilation of a list of the most frequently occurring phrasal verbs in the corpus. This list serves as a foundational resource for ESL/EFL learners embarking on the journey of learning phrasal verbs.

Liao and Fukuya (2004) adopt a distinct perspective by investigating the phenomenon of phrasal verb avoidance among Chinese learners of English. Their study delineates three primary factors influencing learners' propensity to eschew phrasal verbs: proficiency level, phrasal verb type, and test type. Through their analysis, they shed light on the intricacies underlying learners' aversion to using phrasal verbs in their language acquisition journey.

Mirroring the approach of Garnder and Davies (2007), Zarifi and Mukundan (2015) delve into the semantic analysis of phrasal verbs utilizing a corpus-based methodology, with their corpus sourced from Malaysian ESL secondary school textbooks. Their investigation revealed that while these textbooks contained a considerable number of phrasal verbs, their complexity was relatively low and the meanings were frequently reiterated. Drawing inspiration from this research, the authors of the present study embarked on a similar inquiry into the meanings and prevalence of phrasal verbs within a textbook context, subsequently devising a questionnaire for further exploration.

In the domain of English language acquisition by Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian learners, Rizvić-Eminović, Hadžić & Bureković (2023) explore the effect of corpus-based activities on the acquisition of phrasal verbs among primary and secondary school students, while Mandić (2016) examines the English phrasal verbs containing the particles 'down' and 'up', providing their corresponding Serbian translation equivalents. Drawing parallels to Liao and Fukuya (2004), Udovičić (2017) investigates the intralingual and interlingual errors made by Croatian students when using phrasal verbs.

Considering the absence of studies that explore the impact of polysemy on phrasal verb acquisition, the following hypotheses are posited:

> H1: The students have a better understanding of the meanings of phrasal verbs included in their textbooks in contrast to alternative meanings of the same phrasal verbs not addressed in the textbooks.

H2: The students achieving higher grades in English demonstrate enhanced proficiency in phrasal verb knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

Design and the procedure of the study

The research utilized a questionnaire structured into three different sections. The initial segment (Section A) featured two general inquiries concerning the students, where they were required to select the appropriate response. Following this, Section B comprised ten different phrasal verbs, each accompanied by three potential definitions of those phrasal verbs. Among these options, one was derived from the textbook, another from a dictionary, and the third was incorrect. The students were tasked with identifying the correct definition(s) of the given phrasal verb, with the possibility of selecting more than one answer. Section C mirrored Section B in terms of containing the same phrasal verbs, yet presented them within contextual sentences. For each phrasal verb, two example sentences were provided, each illustrating a distinct meaning (one aligned with the textbook and the other with the dictionary). The sentences were in English and the students were prompted to translate them into Bosnian. Preceding the completion of each section, the students were given precise instructions in Bosnian, ensuring clarity and eliminating any potential confusion. Furthermore, the instructions for each section were repeated prior to its commencement, ensuring comprehensive understanding among all students.

The primary objective of the second and third sections was to assess the depth of students' understanding of phrasal verb meanings. Given the propensity of students to resort to guessing when provided with multiple-choice options, the inclusion of the third section aimed to ensure a genuine grasp of phrasal verb meanings within contextual usage.

The research was conducted at *Elči Ibrahim-pašina* madrasah in Travnik, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Upon obtaining approval from the madrasah principal, the questionnaires were distributed. Teachers administered the questionnaires to students following their regular classes, and the students completed them accordingly.

The gathered data was analysed and processed using SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*). In the data processing phase, any unanswered questions were treated as incorrect responses.

Participants of the research

The research comprised 47 high school seniors, consisting of 27 males and 20 females. No placement test was administered; however, according to the existing

curriculum, all participants were presumed to possess an English proficiency level corresponding to B2.

Corpus of the study

The questionnaire for the research was formulated using the *Gateway B2 Student Book* by David Spencer and the *Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary for Learners of English* (hereinafter OPVD). The *Gateway B2 Student Book* was selected because it aligns with the curriculum followed by the participating students in their regular classes.

Initially, all phrasal verbs from the textbook were manually identified and recorded along with their frequences of occurrence and the number of distinct meanings they had in the textbook. This process resulted in the compilation of a comprehensive list of phrasal verbs from the textbook, detailing their frequency and semantic diversity. A selection was made of the ten most prevalent phrasal verbs from this list. However, phrasal verbs with only a single meaning were excluded from consideration, regardless of their frequency. Additionally, if a phrasal verb had only two meanings in the OPVD, and both meanings were already covered in the textbook, the phrasal verb was omitted from the research, even if it ranked among the most frequently occurring ones. Finally, only phrasal verbs comprising a single particle were retained for inclusion in the research.

Once the list with the ten most frequently occurring phrasal verbs in the textbook was compiled, each phrasal verb was cross-referenced with the OPVD to determine the number of meanings listed therein. Subsequently, the following table was created to present the identified phrasal verbs, alongside their respective frequencies and meanings, providing an overview of the most prevalent phrasal verbs in the textbook and their semantic variations.

Phrasal verb	Number of times appearing in the textbook	Number of different meanings in the textbook	Number of different meanings in the OPVD
1. Set (something) up	3	2	4
2. Go up	3	2	11
3. Go out	9	1	10
4.Get (something) up	3	1	9
5. Work (something) out	5	2	10
6. Give away	6	2	3
7. Run on (something)	3	1	7
8. Pick (something) up	9	3	14
9. Take (something) away	3	3	6
10. Sell out	3	1	5

Table 1. List of the most frequently occurring phrasal verbs in the textbook

Based on the data presented in Table 1, a questionnaire was devised. Section B of the questionnaire consisted of ten questions, with each question providing three potential definitions for the corresponding phrasal verb listed in Table 1. One option featured a definition extracted from the textbook, another presented a definition sourced from the OPVD, while the third option comprised a fabricated, incorrect definition. In this section the students were required to select the appropriate definition(s).

In Section C, the same ten phrasal verbs were contextualized to illustrate two distinct meanings. This section comprised twenty English sentences with each phrasal verb appearing in two sentences. One sentence aligned with the textbook meaning of the phrasal verb and the other reflected the selected meaning of the phrasal verb provided in the OPVD. Efforts were undertaken to maintain the simplicity of the sentences, thereby enabling the students to focus on comprehending the meaning of the phrasal verb as they translate the sentences into Bosnian.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the phrasal verbs utilized in the research, along with the corresponding number and percentage of correct answers attributed to both the textbook and OPVD meaning of these phrasal verbs. Furthermore, the table delineates the number of correct responses categorized by exercise, namely Section B (definitions) and Section C (translations) in the questionnaire.

Phrasal verb	Textbook				OPVD			
	Section B: DEFINITIONS		Section C: TRANSLATIONS		Section B: DEFINITIONS		Section C: TRANSLATIONS	
	No. of correct answers	%	No. of correct answers	%	No. of correct answers	%	No. of correct answers	%
GO UP	32	68	37	79	4	9	35	75
GO OUT	31	66	38	81	5	11	37	79
WORK OUT	26	55	39	83	17	36	37	79
GIVE AWAY	31	66	31	66	18	38	32	68
PICK UP	31	66	37	79	13	28	18	38
SELL OUT	23	49	38	81	9	19	26	55
SET UP	20	43	14	30	22	47	38	81
GET UP	21	45	40	85	8	17	22	47
RUN ON	14	30	26	55	14	30	28	60
TAKE AWAY	22	47	29	62	14	30	24	51
Average:	25	54	33	70	12	27	30	63
Total:	No. of correct answers	%			No. of correct answers	%		
	29	62			21	45		

Table 2. Analysis of the results

The outcomes regarding the meanings derived from the textbook reveal that the majority of phrasal verbs (with the exception of 'run on') elicited correct responses exceeding 40% in Section B. Particularly noteworthy is the high accuracy rate of 68% for the phrasal verb 'go up', followed closely by 'go out', 'give away' and 'pick up', each garnering 66% accuracy. On average, there were 25 correct answers per phrasal verb, representing a 54% success rate. In Section C, the accuracy rates surpassed those of Section B. For most phrasal verbs, correct responses exceeded 65%, with 'get up' achieving the highest accuracy rate at 85%. The average number of correct answers per phrasal verb was 33, equating to a 70% success rate. When considering both sections collectively for the meanings derived from the textbook, the total number of correct answers per phrasal verb amounted to 29, representing a 62% success rate.

On the other hand, the results for the meanings derived from the OPVD differ greatly. In Section B, the number of correct responses predominantly fall below 40%, with the exception of the phrasal verb 'set up' which reaches 47%. Only 'work out' and 'give away' surpass 30%, with the remainder falling below this threshold, the lowest number of correct answers being 9%. On average, there were merely 12 correct answers per phrasal verb in this section. However, Section C reveals contrasting results for the OPVD meanings. Here, the number of correct answers is notably higher, with only two phrasal verbs receiving less than 50% accuracy. The phrasal verb 'set up' emerges as the frontrunner with 81% correct responses, marking it as the phrasal verb with the highest accuracy rate in this section. On average, there were 30 correct answers per phrasal verb, representing a 63% success rate. Considering both sections collectively, the total number of correct answers per phrasal verb amounts to 21, representing a 45% success rate.

Overall, two main conclusions can be inferred from Table 2. Firstly, a discernible trend is observed across both sections (Section A and Section B) concerning both the textbook and OPVD meaning. Specifically, the number of correct answers is notably higher for Section B compared to Section C for both meanings. This suggests that the students demonstrate a better understanding of phrasal verbs when provided with context, irrespective of their familiarity with the different meanings of the phrasal verb. Secondly, the total number of correct answers is higher for the meanings of phrasal verbs sourced from the textbook compared to those from the OPVD. A notable disparity of 17% is evident, with the correct answer rate for the meanings of phrasal verbs from the textbook reaching 62%.

Table 3 illustrates the correlation between students' grades and their performance in the questionnaire. The data reveals a positive correlation, supported by a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.411 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.004. This indicates that students

with higher grades exhibit a greater understanding of phrasal verbs compared to those with lower grades.

		Grade	Total
Grade	Pearson Correlation	1	.411[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	47	47
Total	Pearson Correlation	.411[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	47	47
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Table 1. Correlation between knowledge and grades

CONCLUSION

Phrasal verbs represent a nuanced and intricate aspect of the English language, essential for non-native speakers aiming to achieve native-like fluency. Their multifaceted nature, often encompassing several meanings, poses a considerable challenge to learners. In this context, the present research endeavours to explore whether final-year high school students exhibit a deeper comprehension of the meanings of phrasal verbs featured in their textbooks as opposed to those that are not addressed within the instructional materials. The findings of the research underscore several significant conclusions. Firstly, the familiarity of students with phrasal verbs derived from their textbooks surpasses that of meanings sourced from the dictionary, validating the initial hypothesis. Secondly, a positive correlation exists between students' proficiency in phrasal verbs and their academic grades in English, thereby affirming the second hypothesis. Lastly, students exhibit a deeper understanding of phrasal verbs when presented within contextualized examples, as opposed to mere definitions. These outcomes collectively highlight the importance of contextual learning and the impact of academic performance on language acquisition.

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RAZUMIJEVANJE RAZLIČITIH ZNAČENJA
ENGLESKIH FRAZNIH GLAGOLA

Sažetak

Proces učenja fraznih glagola uvelike otežava činjenica da mnogi frazni glagoli imaju po nekoliko značenja (Gardner i Davies, 2007: 352), a da se u udžbenicima pominju samo neka (Zarifi i Mukundan, 2015: 793). Stoga ovo istraživanje ima za cilj da utvrdi da li je poznavanje određenih značenja engleskih fraznih glagola kod srednjoškolskih učenika čiji je nivo poznavanja engleskog jezika B2 uslovljeno njihovom zastupljenošću u udžbenicima. Glavna hipoteza u radu jeste ta da će učenici bolje poznavati značenja fraznih glagola koja su prisutna u udžbenicima u odnosu na druga značenja istih fraznih glagola koja nisu tretirana u udžbenicima. Nadalje, pretpostavili smo da će bolje rezultate postići učenici koji imaju više ocjene iz engleskog jezika. Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da su učenici bolje upoznati sa značenjima fraznih glagola koja su obrađena u udžbenicima, te da su uspješniji oni koji imaju bolje ocjene iz engleskog jezika, čime su potvrđene naše obje hipoteze.

Ključne riječi: *engleski frazni glagoli, EFL, B2 nivo poznavanja engleskog jezika*