

Pragma-linguistic Difficulties in the Recognition of Phrasal Verbs by Iraqi EFL University Learners

Mohanad A. Amret*, Sinan A. Yousif

Faculty of Arts, Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, Iraq

Corresponding Author: Mohanad A. Amret, E-mail: mndhj_87@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to recognize the level of pragma-linguistic difficulties Iraqi EFL university learners face when handling phrasal verbs. Despite the fact that phrasal verbs are easy to understand by native speakers of English, non-native speakers usually encounter some difficulties in understanding the meaning of a phrasal verb depending on the meaning of the root verb, or different phrasal verbs of the same root. The problem might be attributed to pragma-linguistic knowledge. However, culture gap could be the reason behind such difficulties. The aim of the study is (1) to evaluate the pragma-linguistic level of interpreting phrasal verbs as understood and used by Iraqi EFL university learners, (2) to check the level of difficulty they experience while recognizing phrasal verbs, and (3) to find out reasons behind such misinterpretations. It is hypothesized that (1) the pragma-linguistic interpretation of phrasal verbs tends to play an important role in understanding the message conveyed by the speaker; (2) cultural gap could be the reason that EFL learners recognize phrasal verbs incorrectly, and (3) mother tongue language might make it difficult for EFL learners to understand phrasal verbs. To verify the aforementioned hypothesis, a test has been constructed and administered to a sample of 100 fourth-year Iraqi EFL university learners, morning classes at the department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts, in Mustansiriyah University, during the academic year 2017 – 2018. The responses of the students have been collected and linguistically analyzed according to a model given by Richards and Schmidt (2010). It has been found that Iraqi students' lack of cultural norms of the target language makes it difficult for them to understand phrasal verbs. The lack of this knowledge is considered as a factor of confusion and then failure. The influence of the first language culture on the recognition of phrasal verbs may be seen as a negative first language transfer. The reason behind this negative transfer is that the norms and principles of first language are different from the norms and principles of the target language. It has been concluded that Iraqi EFL university learners have difficulties in pragma-linguistic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Iraqi EFL university learners face great difficulties in using phrasal verbs while communicating with other people. While using phrasal verbs, Iraqi EFL university learners have been highly influenced by their mother tongue language.

INTRODUCTION

The relationships of prepositions to the other constituents of a sentence seem to be illogical; i.e., there is uncertainty of the proper use of prepositions. Most of prepositions have no very clearly-defined meaning apart from the phrase or construction they occur in. For instance, the commonest sense attaching to “on” is expressed when one speaks of ‘sitting on a chair’, or ‘placing something on the table’...etc. But does this have any connection with the use of the same preposition in expressions like ‘on duty’, ‘on fire’? The same argument continues when contrasting ‘in room’, ‘in danger’, and ‘in the evening’. Moreover, the problem goes on when differentiating prepositions from particles. The former usually comes before nouns and the latter comes after verbs.

However, the important problem that should be explained here is that in certain phrasal verbs (verb + preposition), the

choice of one or another preposition make a rather notable distinction of meaning, for example, back (up, down),

Back down = withdraw a statement, an accusation etc.

1- Sara's announcement could easily destroy our reputation.

We should get him to **back down**.

Back up = support someone.

2- Will Jane back Peter up when he tells the story to the police?

DEFINITIONS

Crystal (2008: 367) defines phrasal verbs as “A type of verb consisting of a sequence of a lexical element plus one or more particles e.g. come in, get up, look out for”.

Fischer et al. (2004: 180) believe that phrasal verbs are verbs plus a particle whose meaning cannot often be “inferred from the meaning of the verb and the particle, which

seems to suggest that we are dealing with semantic units". They (ibid) add that syntactically speaking, phrasal verbs usually "form a fairly well-defined class, which is evident, for instance, from their word order properties".

Richards and Schmidt (2010:436) state that a phrasal verb is "a verbal construction consisting of a verb plus an adverb particle". They (ibid) argue that phrasal verbs should be distinguished from prepositional particles depending on their grammatical behaviour. In the former, particles can occur after the object and pronoun objects can occur only between the verb and the particle. However, in the latter, particles cannot occur after the object and pronoun objects can occur only after the particle. For example:

- 3- a. *Turn off the radio please.*
b. *I will apply for the job.*
- 4- a. *Turn the radio off please.*
b. **I will apply the job for.*
- 5- a. *Turn it off please.*
b. **I will apply it for.*
- 6- a. **Turn off it please.*
b. *I will apply for it.*

In sentences marked (a), 'turn off' functions as a phrasal verb because the object 'the radio' can occur after or before the particle 'off' and the object pronoun 'it' can occur only between the two parts of the phrasal verb. However, in sentences marked (b), 'apply for' functions as a prepositional verb because the object 'the job' can occur only after the particle 'for' and the object pronoun 'it' can occur only after the particle 'for'.

Aitchison (1999: 69f) maintains that it is necessary to differentiate between prepositions and particles. Prepositions usually come before nouns to make prepositional phrases, but particles come after verbs to make phrasal verbs, for example:

- 7- *The mouse ran up the clock.*
8- *The mouse ate up the cheese.*

In (7), the word 'up' functions as a preposition, so one can say 'Up the clock ran the mouse'. However, it is wrong to say 'Up the cheese ate the mouse'. In (8), the word 'up' functions as a particle, so one can say 'The mouse ate the cheese up' but it is wrong to say 'The mouse ran the clock up'.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF PHRASAL VERBS

Acklam (1992: xiii f) classifies phrasal verbs into four types according to their grammatical behaviour in sentences. These types are:

A- Verb + Adverb (no object)

In this category, the verb and the adverb cannot be separated and as this type of phrasal verbs are intransitive; there is no passive form for sentences of this category. For example:

- 9- *Yesterday, the car broke down two blocks from home and I had to walk.*

B- Verb + Adverb + Object/Verb + Object + Adverb

In this category, the verb and the adverb can be separated. If the object is a noun, it can go either after or before the adverb. However, if it is a pronoun, it must be before the adverb. For example:

- 10- *Our teacher may put off the lecture to the next week.*
11- *Our teacher may put the lecture off to the next week.*
12- *Our teacher may put it off to the next week.*
13- ** Our teacher may put off it to the next week.*

C- Verb + Preposition + Object

Here, the verb and the preposition cannot be separated.

For example:

- 14- *I am looking for my brother.*
15- *I am looking for him.*
16- ** I am looking my brother for.*
17- ** I am looking him for.*

D- Verb + Adverb + Preposition + Object

In this type of phrasal verbs, the verb has two particles. The verb and the two particles cannot be separated. For example:

- 18- *I don't know why our teacher usually puts up with her behaviour.*
19- *I don't know why our teacher usually puts up with it.*
20- ** I don't know why our teacher usually puts her behaviour up with.*
21- ** I don't know why our teacher usually puts it up with.*

Seidl & McMordie (1998: 101) mention that learners of English language usually face difficulties in understanding phrasal verbs used in everyday English expressions. The reason behind such difficulties is that the meaning of most phrasal verbs is quite different from the meaning of the individual words of the phrasal verbs. For example,

- 22- a- *Jessica took the suitcase and packed her clothes in.*
b- *Peter wants to pack his job in.*

In the sentence marked (a), the meaning of the phrasal verb (pack something in) is quite clear as there is a strong relation in meaning between the phrasal verb and its individual words. However, in the sentence marked (b), the meaning of the same phrasal verb has no relation to the meaning of its individual words.

Moreover, some phrasal verbs may have several idiomatic meanings according to the words they go with, i.e., its 'collocations'. Let's consider the idiomatic meanings of the phrasal verb (take off):

- 23- *The plane took off two hours ago.*
24- *The thief took off quickly as soon as they noticed him.*
25- *The sales took off two months before Christmas.*

From the examples above, it is quite obvious that the meaning of the phrasal verb (take off) is different as it comes in different collocations. In sentence (23), 'take off' means 'left the ground', in sentence (24), 'take off' means 'ran away in a hurry', and in sentence (25), 'take off' means 'began to improve greatly or make a profit'.

Thomson & Martinet, (1986: 315f) believe that, in everyday English, it is very common to put prepositions or adverbs after certain verbs in order to get different meanings, such as:

Give up = abandon (a habit or an attempt).

Look after = take care of.

Look for = search for, seek.

Yet, it is important to check if the phrasal verb is transitive (i.e., takes an object) or intransitive (i.e., cannot take an object).

Look for is a transitive phrasal verb, for example:

26- *I am looking for my passport.*

Turn up is an intransitive one, for example:

27- *I am not sure he will turn up.*

However, a phrasal verb could have two different meanings, and to be transitive in one and intransitive in the others. For example,

Take off can mean “remove”. It is then a transitive phrasal verb, for example:

28- *He took off his hat.*

Take off can also mean “rise from the ground”. Here it is an intransitive one, for example:

29- *The plane took off at ten o'clock.*

In transitive phrasal verbs, noun objects are usually placed at the end of the phrasal verb. For example,

30- *I am looking for my glasses.*

However, with some phrasal verbs, they can be placed either at the end or immediately after the verb, i.e., before the short word. For example,

31- *He took off his coat.*

32- *He took his coat off.*

Yet, pronoun objects are sometimes placed at the end of the phrasal verb, but they are more often placed immediately after the verb. For example,

33- *I am looking for them.*

34- *He took it off.* (Ibid).

DESCRIPTION OF THE TEST

The test consists of one part and it is a recognition test. It is a multiple choice question and it has 25 items. Each item is a sentence that contains a phrasal verb and it is accompanied with four answers. Each answer tries to give the exact meaning of the phrasal verb. The students have to choose the correct answer.

Population of the Test

The population of the present study is fourth – year Iraqi EFL university learners, morning classes at the department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University during the academic year 2017 – 2018. The total number of students is (134). The randomly chosen sample is (100) students. This number constitutes 74.6% out of the total number.

Administration of the Test

The test was administered to the students at the department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University on May 7th 2018.

Test's scores

The Tables 1 and 2 below give detailed explanation of students' scores aided with rates.

Factors of failure

Answering the given test, some students have faced difficulties in recognizing the exact meaning of phrasal verbs giv-

Table 1. Total students' scores

Question number	Students' scores	Whole scores	Rate
1	987	2500	39.4

Table 2. Students' scores in each item

Item number	Students' scores	Whole scores	Rate
1	50	100	50%
2	40	100	40%
3	33	100	33%
4	50	100	50%
5	40	100	40%
6	35	100	35%
7	37	100	37%
8	56	100	56%
9	29	100	29%
10	28	100	28%
11	48	100	48%
12	35	100	35%
13	28	100	28%
14	19	100	19%
15	21	100	21%
16	48	100	48%
17	39	100	39%
18	44	100	44%
19	46	100	46%
20	64	100	64%
21	16	100	16%
22	27	100	27%
23	54	100	54%
24	56	100	56%
25	44	100	44%
Total	987	2500	39.4%

en in the test. However, many factors may lie behind these difficulties. These factors might be syntactic, semantic or socio-pragmatic. So, it is necessary to shed light of some examples taken from the test so as to arrive at a better understanding for these factors of failure of fourth-year-students in recognizing phrasal verbs.

Item (1): He wasn't cut out for the job

Some students have chosen (a. They chose him for the job). Looking at this answer, it is clear that those students have failed in recognizing the correct meaning of the phrasal verb 'cut out for'. It seems that they depend totally on their first language culture in understanding these words. They rely either on the word 'cut' or 'out' and they interpret it into 'fire someone from his/her job'. Besides, because the sentence is negative, they chose answer (a). However, the correct answer is (c. He wasn't suited to the job)

Item (3): I don't think he will turn up

Looking at the responses of this item, it is obvious that some students have faced problems in semantic level. Many stu-

dents have interpreted the phrasal verb ‘turn up’ into ‘return’ as they have chosen (d. don’t think he’ll return), which is not the case. They have failed in recognizing that the meaning of ‘turn up’ is ‘come’. However, the correct answer is (a. don’t think he will come).

Item (5): You will have to stand up to him

Some students have chosen (a. You must give him your chair), others have chosen (b. mustn’t sit down when he comes).

Considering the responses chosen by those students, it seems obvious that they have interpreted ‘stand up’ as the act of respecting other people or behaving politely. The reason behind such an interpretation is that they are strongly influenced by their mother tongue culture where people usually show respect by standing up when someone comes in or even by offering their chairs to newcomers. However, the correct answer is (c. mustn’t be afraid to argue with him.).

Item (6): He was taken in by the salesman

Looking at the responses for this item, it is clear that some students fail in recognizing the correct answer due to their lack of semantic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Many students have missed the correct answer and one student didn’t answer this item. Some students have chosen (a. invited inside) depending on the literal meaning of ‘take’ as a verb and ‘in’ as an adverb which is not the case. Others have chosen (b. liked) depending on the figurative meaning of ‘taken’ as an adjective and neglecting the word ‘in’. However, the correct answer is (c. deceived).

Item (7): He often runs people down

Checking responses of this item, it become clear that some students have difficulties in semantic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Some students have chosen (a. make people tired.) as they have interpreted ‘ran down’ literally into ‘make people run down’ which is not the case. However, the correct answer is (b. says bad things about others.).

Item (11): I am fed up with this

Some students have chosen (a. I eat). Others have chosen (d. I have eaten too much).

Analyzing answers of this item, it can be said that some students have failed in recognizing the phrasal verb ‘fed up with’ that they have interpreted ‘fed’ literally as an equivalent of ‘eat’ and the particle ‘up’ as an adverb that means ‘full’ and ‘with’ as a preposition that means ‘by’. The interpretation these responses suggest doesn’t harmonize with the message conveyed by this item. Therefore, it is clear that they have some difficulties in semantic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. However, the correct answer is (c. I no longer like.).

Item (12): That man is very well off

Checking answers of this item, it is easy to say that some students have faced problems in recognizing the correct answer because only limited number of students has chosen the correct answer. The main problem they have faced is related to semantic knowledge. Some students have interpreted ‘well’ as ‘in a good health’ because they have chosen (a. is never sick). Others have interpreted ‘well’ as ‘famous’ since they have chosen (b. is well known.), which is not the case. However, the correct answer is (d. has a lot of money.).

Table 3. Unanswered items

Item number	Unanswered items
1	2
2	4
3	0
4	0
5	3
6	2
7	0
8	0
9	2
10	3
11	0
12	5
13	0
14	0
15	0
16	0
17	2
18	5
19	4
20	4
21	0
22	4
23	0
24	0
25	0
Total	40

Item (20): He gave up cigarettes

Looking at responses of this item, it is obvious that culture plays an important role in comprehending what is meant by the speaker, i.e., recognizing the suitable answer. Some students have chosen (a. He gave all his friends cigarettes). Others have chosen (b. He began smoking.). First, some students have interpreted the verb ‘gave’ literally and neglected the particle ‘up’. Second, they are strongly influenced by their culture as they are used to offer cigarettes to all members of the group if they want to smoke a cigarette. This interpretation is quite different from the message this item suggests. However, the correct answer is (c. He stopped smoking.).

Item (24): He picked up some French

Checking answers of this item, it is clear that some students have faced difficulties in semantic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Some students have chosen (a. He carried a Frenchman.). Others have chosen (d. He met a few French people.). Both answers show that those students have interpreted the verb ‘pick up’ in the sense of ‘offering a lift by one’s car’, which is not the case. However, the correct answer is (c. He learned a little French.).

Unanswered items

While answering the given test, some students not only faced difficulties in recognizing phrasal verbs correctly, but failed in answering some items as well. This means that they left these items unanswered. Therefore, this failure could be attributed to total lack of linguistic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Besides, the number of students who have left some items unanswered is clarified in detail in the Table 3 below.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

- 1- While answering the test made for the topic under investigation, most Iraqi EFL university learners have faced difficulties in the test. Their failure in recognizing phrasal verbs scores 39.4% because they have scored 987 out of the total score 2500.
- 2- The students' lack of cultural norms of the target language makes it difficult for them to understand phrasal verbs given in the test. The lack of this knowledge is considered as a factor of confusion and then failure.
- 3- The most difficult item the students have faced in the test is (item No. 21), since only sixteen students out of one hundred students have answered this item correctly. But the easiest item one is (item No. 20) because sixty-four students out of one hundred students have answered this item correctly.
- 4- The influence of the first language culture on the recognition of phrasal verbs may be seen as a negative first language transfer. The reason behind this negative transfer is that the norms and principles of first language are different from the norms and principles of the target language.

CONCLUSIONS

From the discussion of the results and the analysis of the learners' responses in section 5 above, some conclusions could be stated as follows:

- 1- Iraqi EFL university learners have difficulties in pragmatic-linguistic knowledge as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. Therefore, this has validated the first hypothesis.
- 2- Culture gap plays an important role in understanding what is meant by the speaker. It is one of the main reasons that Iraqi EFL university learners fail in recognizing and interpreting phrasal verbs properly. Thus, this has verified the second hypothesis.
- 3- While using phrasal verbs, Iraqi EFL university learners have been highly influenced by their mother tongue language. Therefore, they fail in recognizing phrasal verbs correctly. Accordingly, this has proved the third hypothesis.
- 4- Scoring 987 out of the total score 2500, i.e., 39.4% has showed that Iraqi EFL university learners not only face great difficulties in recognizing phrasal verbs but they are incapable of communicating phrasal verbs properly.

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