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Phrasal Verbs in EFL Writing: Task-Related Differences in Verb Choice in a Military-Oriented EFL Course

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Abstract: This article examines the use of phrasal verbs in the written work of ten adult intermediate-level EFL learners enrolled in a twelve-week intensive English course with a professional orientation. The study starts from a familiar classroom observation: learners may recognize common verb-particle constructions such as carry out, set up, find out, or follow up, yet still prefer single-word verbs when writing independently. Two classroom tasks were used to examine this issue. The first was a short report-writing activity designed to capture learners' default choices in a professional-style text. The second was a reformulation task in which learners reconsidered a short paragraph containing single-word verbs and replaced them with phrasal verb alternatives where they considered this appropriate. The analysis was carried out manually and focused only on lexical verbs expressing actions, procedures, or decisions. The findings show a clear task-related difference. In the report-writing task, learners produced eighty-three relevant verbs, of which fourteen were phrasal verbs and sixty-nine were single-word lexical verbs. In the reformulation task, the same learners produced phrasal verb alternatives in seventeen out of fifty possible replacement slots. These results do not suggest full productive control of phrasal verbs, but they do indicate that some items were available to learners when the task explicitly drew attention to lexical choice. The study contributes to classroom-based research on learner vocabulary use by showing how task conditions can affect the activation of phrasal verbs in writing and by arguing for reformulation activities as a useful bridge between recognition and controlled production.
Keywords: phrasal verbs; verb-particle constructions; learner language; lexical choice; EFL writing; English for Specific Purposes; vocabulary acquisition.

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs occupy a significant place in English vocabulary, not only because they are frequent, but also because they often express actions and relations with a degree of naturalness that single-word equivalents do not always provide. In professional and operational communication, expressions such as carry out, set

up, follow up, hand over, take over, or point out are commonly used to describe procedures, responsibilities, decisions, and transfers of authority. However, for learners of English as a foreign language, these constructions remain problematic. Previous research has repeatedly shown that learners tend to prefer single-word lexical verbs in contexts where a phrasal verb would also be possible, a tendency usually discussed as avoidance (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). At the same time, corpus-based studies have demonstrated that phrasal verbs are too frequent to be treated as marginal or optional vocabulary (Biber et al., 1999; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015).

Although the limited use of phrasal verbs in learner language has been well documented, the conditions under which learners actually choose these constructions deserve closer attention. Different writing tasks do not place the same pressure on lexical choice. In independent writing, learners may rely on the verbs that feel safest or most formal. In a reformulation task, however, they are asked to look again at meaning and wording, which may make certain alternatives easier to retrieve. The issue is therefore not only whether learners know a phrasal verb, but whether a particular task gives them a reason to use it.

The present study approaches this question by focusing on the written production of adult EFL learners enrolled in an intensive language course. Two task types are considered: a short report-writing activity, which encouraged independent production in a professional format, and a lexical reformulation task, which asked learners to reconsider the verbs in a given text and replace them where appropriate. The comparison between these two activities allows us to observe whether phrasal verbs remain peripheral in both situations or whether they become more accessible when attention is directed explicitly toward lexical alternatives.

The study is guided by three questions: how often do learners use phrasal verbs in an independent report-writing task; how often do they introduce such constructions when reformulating a text; and what does the comparison between the two tasks suggest about the relation between lexical knowledge and use? The article does not aim to generalize broadly from a small group. Its purpose is more modest: to describe how one group of adult learners handled a specific lexical category in two classroom-based writing tasks.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Phrasal Verbs and Multi-Word Expression

Phrasal verbs are usually understood as verb-particle constructions in which an adverbial particle contributes to the meaning of the whole expression. Examples such as carry out, find out, set up, and take over show that the particle may modify, extend, or in some cases substantially reshape the meaning of the base verb. In the present study, the terms phrasal verbs, verb-particle constructions, and verb-particle combinations are used interchangeably for combinations of a lexical verb and an adverbial particle. Prepositional verbs such as look at or listen to are not included, since their second element functions as a preposition rather than as an adverbial particle.

The classification of phrasal verbs has long been a difficult matter. Darwin and Gray (1999), for example, argue that traditional classifications do not always account for the variation these constructions display. Some combinations are semantically transparent, while others are idiomatic; some allow separation of verb and particle, whereas others are fixed. This instability explains, at least in part, why phrasal verbs are not easily reduced to a simple pedagogical category. They are grammatical, lexical, and semantic units at the same time.

From a lexical point of view, phrasal verbs belong to the wider field of multi-word expressions. Research on such expressions suggests that many of them are stored and processed as units rather than assembled each time through rule-based combination (Moon, 1997; Wray, 2002). If this view is accepted, then the teaching of phrasal verbs cannot rely only on explanation of form. Learners also need repeated contact with these constructions in meaningful contexts, until at least some of them become available for use rather than merely recognizable during reading or listening.

2.2. Learner Use and Lexical Choice

Studies of learner language have consistently shown that phrasal verbs create difficulties in both comprehension and production. One of the best-known observations is learners' preference for single-word verbs where phrasal verbs might be expected. Early studies by Cornell (1985) and Dagut and Laufer (1985) associated this tendency with avoidance, especially when similar structures are absent from the learners' first language. Later research, including Liao and Fukuya (2004), confirmed that learners may continue to choose single-word verbs even when they are familiar with possible phrasal verb alternatives.

However, this preference should not be interpreted too quickly. Avoidance may have several causes: semantic opacity, uncertainty about word order, lack of confidence, insufficient exposure, or concern about register. In professional writing contexts, another factor becomes relevant. Learners may believe that single-word verbs such as perform, establish, or resolve sound more formal and therefore more suitable for a report. Thus, the issue is not simply whether learners know phrasal verbs, but whether they consider them usable in a particular type of text. The distinction between receptive and productive knowledge is, in this case, essential.

2.3. Frequency and Pedagogical Considerations

Large-scale corpus research has confirmed the importance of phrasal verbs in English usage. Gardner and Davies (2007) showed that a relatively small number of phrasal verbs accounts for a substantial proportion of occurrences. Garnier and Schmitt (2015) developed this observation further by proposing a pedagogically oriented list of frequent phrasal verbs and their core meanings. Such studies are useful because they shift attention from the impossible task of teaching all phrasal verbs to the more realistic task of selecting frequent and functional items.

The pedagogical consequence is clear, though not always easy to apply. Instead of presenting long lists of phrasal verbs in isolation, instruction may focus on high-frequency items and on contexts in which learners have a reason to use them. Vocabulary research has repeatedly emphasized that exposure alone is not sufficient; productive control also requires active use and recycling (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). This is especially true for phrasal verbs, whose meaning and appropriateness often depend on context, register, and task.

2.4. Task Type and Vocabulary Use

While the difficulty and frequency of phrasal verbs have been widely discussed, the role of task type has received less attention. Writing tasks do not create identical conditions for lexical choice. A task based on independent production tends to reveal the learner's default preferences, including those forms that feel safest. A reformulation task, by contrast, may interrupt this default choice and invite the learner to consider alternatives (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007).

This distinction is useful because it allows us to ask whether phrasal verbs are absent from learner writing because they are unknown, or because they are not readily activated. If learners use more phrasal verbs in reformulation than in independent writing, the difference may suggest that at least some of these constructions are present in their lexical repertoire, but remain peripheral in spontaneous production. The present study explores this possibility in a classroom setting.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out in an intensive English language course for adult learners involved in professional training. The course lasted twelve weeks and included approximately six hours of instruction per day. Its syllabus combined general English development with communicative activities connected to professional contexts. The participants were ten intermediate-level learners. All had studied English before, but their

confidence in written production varied, especially when they had to choose between a familiar single-word verb and a less secure phrasal verb.

The data were collected during ordinary classroom work rather than through a separate proficiency test. Earlier in the course, learners had met several phrasal verbs in communicative activities, including carry out, find out, work out, set up, sort out, follow up, and hand over. These items were relevant to the professional orientation of the course because they can describe procedures, coordination, problem-solving, and transfer of responsibility. The study did not test first exposure to these forms. It examined whether previously encountered verb-particle constructions appeared in learner writing under two different task conditions.

The first task was a short report-writing activity. Participants were asked to describe how a team completed a task or dealt with a problem. No list of phrasal verbs was supplied during the activity, since the purpose was to observe the verbs learners selected when writing independently in a professional-style format. The second task was a lexical reformulation activity. Learners worked with the same short paragraph, which contained five single-word verbs that could reasonably be replaced by phrasal verb alternatives. They were not required to replace every verb; instead, they were asked to reformulate the paragraph where they considered another expression more appropriate.

The analysis focused on lexical verbs used to express actions, procedures, and decisions. Auxiliary verbs and verbs with mainly grammatical functions were not included in the count. Phrasal verbs were defined as combinations of a lexical verb and an adverbial particle, such as carry out or set up. Prepositional verbs, such as look at, were excluded. Each relevant verb was identified in the learner texts and classified manually as either a single-word lexical verb or a verb-particle construction. Ambiguous cases were checked against the definition used in the study and treated consistently. Because the dataset is small, the results are presented descriptively, without statistical claims beyond the observed counts and proportions.

4. Results

The report-writing task produced eighty-three relevant verbs referring to actions, procedures, or decisions. Fourteen of these were phrasal verbs, while sixty-nine were single-word lexical verbs. In proportional terms, phrasal verbs represented approximately 17% of the relevant verbs identified in the reports. The contrast is therefore clear: when learners wrote independently, single-word verbs were by far the dominant choice.

The reports included frequent use of verbs such as perform, complete, resolve, establish, and organize. These choices were not errors. In many cases they suited the formal tone of a report. At the same time, they show that learners tended to stay with single-word verbs even where a phrasal verb would have been possible. Perform could correspond to carry out, resolve to sort out or work out, and establish to set up. References to transferring responsibility could also have led to hand over, but this option appeared only rarely.

The phrasal verbs that did appear in the reports were mostly familiar items from earlier classroom work. Carry out, find out, work out, and follow up appeared in learner texts, but their overall distribution remained limited. This is an important detail. The learners were not simply unable to use phrasal verbs; rather, these forms did not yet seem to be their first choice when they had to produce a report without lexical prompting.

The reformulation task produced a different pattern. All ten learners worked with the same source paragraph, which contained five possible replacement points. This created fifty opportunities to replace a single-word verb with a phrasal verb. Learners introduced phrasal verbs in seventeen cases, or about 34% of the available opportunities. In the remaining cases, they either kept the original verb or chose another single-word expression. Phrasal verbs still did not become the majority option, but their use increased noticeably when the task directed learners' attention to alternative wording.

The reformulation examples show what kind of lexical movement took place. Some learners used look into for investigate, find out for discover, and set up for establish. These substitutions preserved the meaning of the source paragraph and were acceptable in context. However, the fact that they occurred in roughly one third of the possible slots suggests only partial activation. The task helped learners retrieve some phrasal verbs, but it did not remove their preference for single-word verbs.

Taken together, the two tasks suggest a cautious interpretation. The learners had some productive access to phrasal verbs, especially to items previously encountered in class, but this access depended on the writing situation. In independent report writing, they preferred safer and more formal single-word verbs. In reformulation, where the need to reconsider wording was built into the task, they used phrasal verbs more readily.

5. Discussion

The results confirm a pattern often noticed in learner writing: phrasal verbs may be known, but they are not necessarily selected when learners write independently. The comparison between the two tasks makes this point more visible. If the report-writing task had been the only source of data, the conclusion might have been that learners had weak productive command of phrasal verbs. The reformulation task complicates that conclusion. It shows that at least some verb-particle constructions were accessible when learners were prompted to reconsider lexical choice.

Register is one likely explanation. In a report, learners may feel that verbs such as perform, resolve, and establish sound clearer or more serious than carry out, sort out, and set up. This preference is understandable, especially in a course with a professional orientation. Yet it can also produce a narrow version of formal writing, in which learners avoid expressions that are actually common in procedural and operational discourse. Teaching therefore needs to address not only meaning, but also appropriateness.

The results also illustrate the difference between receptive knowledge, controlled production, and independent use. Recognition does not automatically become retrieval. A learner may understand follow up or hand over in a reading passage and still not choose it when writing a report. Reformulation reduces this distance because it gives learners a concrete reason to compare forms. In that sense, the task is not just a measurement tool; it is also a learning activity.

For classroom practice, the findings support a balanced approach. Learners need exposure to frequent phrasal verbs, but exposure alone is not enough. They also need guided occasions to compare lexical alternatives, revise sentences, and discuss why one expression works better than another in a given context. Activities such as reformulation, paraphrasing, and editing can help move items such as carry out, set up, follow up, hand over, and take over from recognition toward controlled use.

At the same time, phrasal verbs should not be presented as universally preferable. In some contexts a single-word verb will be more precise or more appropriate. The pedagogical aim is not to replace formal verbs with phrasal verbs mechanically, but to expand learners' choices. Learners need to know that phrasal verbs can be informal, neutral, or professionally useful, depending on the item and the context.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the use of phrasal verbs in the written production of ten adult EFL learners attending an intensive professional-orientation language course. By comparing an independent report-writing task with a lexical reformulation activity, it considered how the same learners selected between phrasal verbs and single-word lexical verbs under two task conditions.

The findings show that single-word verbs dominated the report-writing task: learners produced sixty-nine single-word lexical verbs and fourteen phrasal verbs among the eighty-three relevant verbs counted. In the reformulation task, they introduced phrasal verbs in seventeen out of fifty possible replacement slots.

This difference suggests that some phrasal verbs were available to learners, but were not consistently activated in independent writing.

The study contributes to classroom-based research on vocabulary use by showing that underuse of phrasal verbs is not only a matter of knowledge. It is also shaped by the task, by learners' assumptions about register, and by the degree of attention given to lexical alternatives. A learner may know a form and still not use it unless the writing situation makes that form seem relevant and acceptable.

Pedagogically, the results support the use of tasks that ask learners to revisit their wording and compare possible expressions. Such tasks are especially useful when they connect phrasal verbs to realistic communicative purposes rather than presenting them as isolated list items. In professional EFL contexts, this means showing learners where phrasal verbs are natural, where single-word verbs remain preferable, and how both resources can be used with greater control.

The study has clear limitations. It is based on ten learners, one instructional setting, and two writing tasks. The findings should therefore be read as exploratory rather than generalizable. Further research could examine larger groups, different proficiency levels, delayed post-course writing, or a wider range of task types. It would also be useful to compare learners' explanations of their verb choices with the forms they actually use in writing.

Even with these limitations, the study points to a practical issue in vocabulary teaching. What learners know is not always visible in independent production. To understand learner vocabulary more fully, teachers and researchers need to look not only at what forms have been taught, but also at the classroom conditions that help or prevent those forms from being used.

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