



Problems posed by phrasal verbs to undergraduate students

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the use of phrasal verbs by undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language upon using phrasal verbs in writing. Analytical descriptive method has been adopted in analyzing and collecting data through two instruments, diagnostic test for BA university students who are studying English as a foreign language, and a questionnaire for a group of EFL university teachers, the test and the questionnaire, together, have been analyzed through statistical package of social science (SPSS). The main findings of this study are: Undergraduates encounter difficulties when they use phrasal verbs in their writing. Undergraduates lack of knowledge about the functions of the phrasal verbs, negatively affects their writing. Misusing phrasal verbs results in low level of quality of writing. In the light of the results of this study, the researcher has recommended that: university syllabus designers should include phrasal verbs in university courses. Undergraduates should be encouraged to pay attention to the use of phrasal verbs.

Keywords: phrasal verbs, diagnostic test, questionnaire undergraduate, misuse

Introduction

Tracing the origin of language is not an easy process, linguists do not exactly know when the language started, and they know little about the origin of its grammar and use. Fromkin *et al.* (2003: 27) ^[9] points out that: "much is unknown about the nature of human languages, their grammars and use". Also the idea that people know little about the start of language was recognized by Yule (1996: 1) ^[19] who agreed with Fromkin, he said that: "We simply do not know how language originated, we do know that spoken language developed well before written language". Verbs in English language as in all other languages are considered to be the most important elements in sentence construction, there are three kinds of verbs in English language: First, the full or main verbs like: read, write, ignore, and compose. Second, the main auxiliary verbs like be, do and have, Crystal (2008: 46) ^[6] points out that: " In English the main auxiliaries are: be, do, and have e.g. she is leaving, does she know? She has taken". Third, modal auxiliary verbs. Phrasal verbs are made by composing one main verb with a preposition and they sometimes have idiomatic use. It is worth pointing out that Brinton *et al.* (2010: 207-210) ^[4] state that kinds of verbs based on other concepts, such as, intransitive, transitive and ditransitive, they state that: "a verb takes a number of sub categories of verbs can be identified: 1. Intransitive verb, e.g. arrive, cry, laugh, or swim, 2. Transitive verb (also known as 3. Ditransitive verb, e.g. give, send, tell, lend, buy, offer, or show "

Statement of the problem

This Study sets out to underscore the rationale behind undergraduate students' failure to use the phrasal verbs properly in their writing production. The problems that encounter undergraduate university students in the area of using modal auxiliary verbs in their writing. Although many

studies have been done on the field of grammatical construction of sentences and cultural studies as phrasal verbs with their idiomaticity component are greatly cultural, the area of phrasal verbs and their impact on the quality of writing is still virgin for investigation.

Questions of the study

- i) What is the impact of misusing phrasal verbs on the quality of writing?
- ii) Which areas do undergraduates misplace the phrasal verbs in their writing?

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the problems encounter undergraduates in using the modal auxiliary verbs in their writing, in addition to this main objective, the researcher has been trying to achieve the following sub-objectives:

- To show the impacts of misusing phrasal verbs on the quality of undergraduates' writing.
- To show which areas do undergraduates misplace the phrasal verbs in their writing.

Significance of the study

The researcher, as a teacher of English Language, usually observes that undergraduates often oversimplify and misuse phrasal verbs when they speak or write, and this results in bad quality of their writing, so this study researches in the area of the quality of writing which represents a challenge faces undergraduates, particularly when they use the phrasal verbs in their writing, the researcher hopes that the determination of the areas where undergraduates misuse the phrasal verbs in their writing will help them to be aware of such mistakes and to encourage them to organize their thoughts before they start writing.

Limits of the study

This study, titled "*problems posed by phrasal verbs to undergraduate students*", is limited to the academic year 2016-2017, Sudan University of Science and Technology, English language Department, (both male and female undergraduates, 6th semester), to investigate the problems encounter EFL undergraduates university students when using phrasal verbs in their writing.

Literature Review

Jupp. V (2006: 162) ^[11] defines the phrase "literature review" As:

"A critical summary and assessment of the range of existing materials dealing with knowledge and understanding in a given field ... Its purpose is to locate the research project, to form its context or background, and to provide insights into previous work"

The concept of word

Crystal (2008: 522) ^[6] defines the term (word) as: "word (n.) A unit of expression which has universal intuitive recognition by native-speakers, in both spoken and written language". Akmajian *et al.* (2000: 11) explain that "words play an integral role in the human ability to use language creativity far from being a static repository of memorized information, a human vocabulary is a dynamic system". a word is usually oral or written, and has parts and limits in both skills: speaking and writing, as usual the parts of a word (syllables) depends on the number and order of vowels and consonants in the word. The limits of a word in writing are spaces, where as in spoken language the limits of words are periods of silence between a word and the next.

The verb in English language

Verbs in English language as in all other languages are considered to be the most important elements in sentence construction, there are three kinds of verbs in English language: First, the full or main verbs like: read, write, ignore, compose. Second, the main auxiliary verbs like be, do and have, Crystal (2008: 46) ^[6] points out that: " In English the main auxiliaries are: be, do, and have e.g. she is leaving, does she know? She has taken". Third, the main modal auxiliary verbs such as will, would, shall, should, can could, may, might, must, have to and ought. Semi modal auxiliary verbs such as need, used to and dare.

It is worth pointing out that Brinton *et al.* (2010: 207-210) ^[4] state that kinds of verbs based on other concepts, such as, intransitive, transitive and ditransitive, they state that: "a verb takes a number of sub categories of verbs can be identified:1. Intransitive verb, e.g. arrive, cry, laugh, or swim, 2. Transitive verb (also known as 3. Ditransitive verb, e.g. give, send, tell, lend, buy, offer, or show "

Examples have been stated by Verspoor *et al.* (2000: 67) ^[17] who agreed with Brinton *et al.* (2010: 207-210) ^[4] regarding the classification of a verb of different kinds of lexical verbs: He is running a mile. He bought a book. He gave me a book.

Phrasal Verbs

According to Cambridge Dictionary grammar a combination of a verb and an adverb or a verb and a preposition, or both, in

which the combination has a meaning different from the meaning of the words considered separately: "Catch on" is a phrasal verb meaning to understand.

Some transitive two part verbs (see Clauses, Sentences and Phrases) have only one pattern:

N (subject) + V + p + N (object)

[Note: N = noun; V = verb; p = particle]

Table 1

N (Subject)	Verb	Particle	N (Object)
She	takes	after	her mother
I	can count	on	you
My father	comes	from	Madrid

Some transitive two part verbs (see Clauses, Sentences and Phrases) are phrasal verbs. Phrasal verbs have two different patterns:

- The usual pattern is: N + V + N + p

Table 2

N (Subject)	Verb	(N) Object	Particle
She	gave	the money	back
He	knocked	the glass	over
We	will be leaving	our friends and neighbors	behind

But sometimes these verbs have the pattern: N (subject) + V + p + N (object)

Table 3

N (Subject)	Verb	Particle	N (Object)
She	gave	back	the money
He	knocked	over	the glass
We	will be leaving	behind	our friends and neighbor

Methodology of the study

In this part of the study the researcher describes the methods used for data collection. He presents the target subject, study instruments and the procedures to collect data. Then he goes on to present tools, reliability and validity of the study instruments. In order to collect the data the study uses a diagnostic test for BA university students and a questionnaire for EFL teachers to examine a random sample of semester six students at Sudan University of Science and Technology to measure their performance in the diagnostic test. In the conclusion section of this study, the researcher concludes with a summary.

Population of the study

The population of this study is students of the academic year 2016 - 6017 in the department of English Language, College of Languages, Sudan University of Science and Technology. The data which this study used to analyze were collected from 80 male and female students. The students are selected randomly from a total population of nearly two hundred students; a random selection has taken place so that the finding can result in real situation. Most of the students sample at age of eighteen to twenty-one and they have been studying English as foreign language for successive eleven years.

Sample of the study

The total number of students included in the diagnostic test was eighty, because most of the students in Sudan University, College of Languages, English Department, are female, the number of females(56) in this study is more than the number of males(24).

Tools for data analysis

In this study, two types of tools are used to gather the required data and information from the subject of this study. These two tools are: A diagnostic test for BA undergraduates at university level and a questionnaire for EFL teachers. Both diagnostic test and teachers questionnaire worked through the statistical package of Social Sciences (SPSS) to conclude to the findings.

Validity and reliability of the study

Nunan (2001: 143-149) ^[14] defines "Reliability refers to the ability of the instrument to give the same result on repeated application of the same subjects". Based on this concept, the teachers' questionnaire and the students' diagnostic test were given to five experts who are university teachers, four of them are PhD holders and the fifth is an M.A. holder. They gave suggestions and opinions on content, structure and design of both tools, their opinions, views and recommendations were confidential and highly respected and applied, and the result is the current forms of the tools, they recommended that both instruments are expected to give nearly the same result whenever they are given twice to the same subject, and they will measure the objective they are constructed for.

Reliability of Teachers questionnaire

To measure the reliability of teachers' questionnaire, the researcher used the (SPSS) statistical packages for social

sciences, coefficient of consistency in respect to Cronbach's alpha has been used to measure the reliability and validity of the teachers' Questionnaire, this has been recognized in the equation below:

$$\alpha = \left(\frac{k}{k-1} \right) \left(1 - \frac{\sum S_i^2}{S^2} \right)$$

Here K = the number of items, K-1= the number of items minus one, S_i = variance of each item, S² = total variance of full – scale of items, this statistical equation results in the following table:

Table 4

Number of items	Alpha Cronbach's Coefficient
16	.728

There for the researcher recognized that the coefficient of reliability is (.728) which is approaching to (1) and this indicates that it is convenient to use this tool (teachers' questionnaire) to be applied on this sample.

Teachers' Questionnaire Validity

Validity, as well, can be resulted by obtaining the square root of reliability, so ($\sqrt{0.728} = 0.85$), this indicate that this questionnaire is approximately, (85%) valid and (73%) reliable.

Teachers' questionnaire responses results and discussion

1/ Most of undergraduate students encounter difficulties regarding where to place modal auxiliary verbs in their writing.

Table 5: Responses to the close ended statement No (1)

Present job	Strongly agree	Agree	To some extent	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Associate professor	3	-	2	-	-	5
Assistant professor	5	7	6	2	-	20
Lecturer	4	10	5	6	-	25
Total	12	17	13	8	-	50
Percentage	24%	34%	26%	16%	0%	100%

Result and Discussion

Twelve teachers (24%) strongly agree that most of undergraduate students encounter difficulties regarding where to place modal auxiliary verbs in their writing, seventeen (34%) agree with this statement. Table 5 above shows the majority of twenty nine teachers out of fifty, with a total percentage of 58%, agree that most of undergraduate students

encounter difficulties regarding where to place phrasal verbs in their writing, so it is clear that the majority of teachers believe that placing phrasal verb correctly in a sentence is a real problem facing undergraduates.

2/ Most of undergraduate students are able to use phrasal verbs in a sentence when these verbs are two or more.

Table 6: Responses to the close ended statement No (2)

Present Job	Strongly agree	Agree	To some extent	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Associate professor	1	2	-	2	-	5
Assistant professor	3	2	8	5	2	20
Lecturer	3	7	9	6	-	25
Total	7	11	17	13	2	50
Percentage	14%	22%	34%	26%	4%	100%

Result and Discussion

Seven teachers (14%) strongly agree that most of undergraduate students are able to order primary and modal auxiliary verbs in a sentence when these verbs are two or more, eleven (22%) agree with this statement, seventeen (34%) agree to some extent. Table 6 above shows a majority

of 35 teachers (70%) agree that most of undergraduate students are not able to use phrasal verbs in a sentence when these verbs are two or more.

3/ Many of undergraduate students confront difficulties when they place an auxiliary verb in a question form.

Table 7: Responses to the close ended statement No (3)

Present job	Strongly agree	Agree	To some extent	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Associate professor	-	4	1	-	-	5
Assistant professor	8	10	2	-	-	20
Lecturer	3	13	5	4	-	25
Total	11	27	8	4	-	50
Percentage	22%	54%	16%	8%	-	100%

Results and Discussion

Eleven teachers (22%) strongly agree that many of undergraduate students confront difficulties when they place an auxiliary verb in a question form, twenty seven (54%) agree with this statement. Table 7 above shows the majority of thirty eight university teachers (76%) agree that many of undergraduate students confront difficulties when they place

an auxiliary verb in a question form, so it can be concluded that many of undergraduates face difficulties in placing an auxiliary verb correctly when they form a question.

2/ Students diagnostic test Results and Discussion

Table 8 shows the performance of (80) students concerning the use of phrasal verbs.

Table 8: students' performance in question (1). Key: 0-1 weak, 2 pass, 4 excellent

Item	Weak	Pass	Good	v. good	excellent	Total
No. of Students	44	20	-	-	16	80
Percentage	55%	25%	-	-	20%	100%

Result and Discussion

Table 9 above which shows the students ability to complete a sentence with a given modal auxiliary verb, the result as shown above is that a majority of forty four students (55%)

were weak level, twenty students (25%) got pass, sixteen students (20%) were excellent, so in brief the final result is that undergraduates face difficulty in using modal auxiliary verbs to complete a sentence even if these verbs are on hand.

Table 9: shows the performance of (80) students concerning the construction of negative forms.

Item	Weak	Pass	Good	v. good	Excellent	Total
No. of Students	52	-	18	-	10	80
Percentage	65%	0%	22.5%	0%	12.5%	100%

Table 9 students performance in question (3) Key: 0-1 weak, 2 good, 3 excellent.

Result and Discussion

Table 9 above which shows the students ability to rewrite an affirmative sentence into a negative one, the result as shown above is that a majority of fifty two students (65%) were weak level, eighteen students (22.5%) were good, ten students (12.5%) were excellent, this indicates that undergraduates face difficulties when they are required to change an affirmative sentence into a negative one.

sentence, the result as shown above is that a majority of sixty students (75%) were weak level, sixteen students (20%) were good, only four students (5%) were excellent, so it is clear that undergraduates face real difficulties when they are required to order auxiliary verbs correctly in a sentence.

Table 10: shows the performance of (80) students concerning the use of phrasal verbs when they are two or more.

Conclusion

The study is intended to research and clarify the problems and challenges encounter undergraduates when they use the phrasal verbs in their writing, and the reasons why they misuse these auxiliary verbs in the area of academic writing, as well as the impact of misusing auxiliary verbs on the quality of their writing. The study, as well, tries to find solutions to the problem of misusing auxiliary verbs in undergraduates' academic writing.

Table 10: Students performance in question (4) Key: 0-1 weak, good, 3 excellent.

Item	Weak	Pass	Good	v. good	Excellent	Total
No. of Students	60	-	16	-	4	80
Percentage	75%	0%	20%	0%	5%	100%

Result and Discussion

Table 10 above shows the students ability to put auxiliary verbs in their correct order when they are two or more in one

Findings

- Undergraduates encounter difficulties when they use modal auxiliary verbs in their writing.
- Undergraduates lack of knowledge about the functions of

- modal auxiliary verbs, negatively affects their writing.
- Misusing modal auxiliary verbs results in low level of quality of writing.

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