

Original Article

The Problem of Using English Phrasal Verbs among Third-Year Students in the Department of English Language

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Abstract - The present study was carried out at the University of Kordofan, during 2025-2026, to investigate the Adversity of comprehending and using English Language Phrasal Verbs (PVs) among Students at the Tertiary Level. The study aimed to investigate the adversity of understanding and the English Language using Phrasal verbs (PVs) and clarify the avoidance of using phrasal verbs (PVs) due to the difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases, besides viewing the phrasal verbs (PVs) structure and its syntactic and semantic characteristics. Descriptive analytical method was followed. Questionnaire and observation checklist were conducted as primary sources for collecting the data. The sample compromised 40 tertiary students which represent 32% from the study population of 250 in university of Kordofan post-graduate students which is selected through Simple random sampling techniques and 20 English language teachers were selected by purposive sampling techniques in university of Kordofan, Faculty of Education and Arts for observation checklist, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS – V-16) was used to analyze the data. The results reveal that 92.5% of respondents stated that Students at the tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs, which is significant at the level ($\chi^2 = 63.5$ $p = 0.000$). There were 75% of the respondents agreed that Students' misunderstanding of Phrasal verbs due to their idiomatic meanings/usage ($\chi^2 = 31.04$ $p = 0.000$), and 81.1% of the respondents agreed that Many tertiary students face challenges in interpreting phrasal verbs in reading materials ($\chi^2 = 38.0$ $p = 0.00001$). There were 87.5% of the respondents agreed that the multiple meanings of some phrasal verbs create confusion among learners. ($\chi^2 = 52.85$ $p = 0.0001$). Regarding the results of the observation checklist, the majority (70%) of observers used phrasal verbs appropriately in spoken responses. ($\chi^2 = 3.2$ $p = 0.000$). There were 65% of them who stated that they showed hesitation when encountering phrasal verbs. ($\chi^2 = 1.8$ $p = 0.0001$). Besides, 70% of observers stated that they ask for clarification when phrasal verbs appear in tasks. ($\chi^2 = 3.2$ $p = 0.000$). It was concluded that Students at the tertiary level face obstacles in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs. Phrasal verbs should be systematically incorporated into English curricula at the tertiary level, with explicit objectives for both receptive and productive skills. The study recommended that teachers should emphasize teaching PVs in meaningful contexts (dialogues, stories, role plays) rather than isolated lists to improve retention and applicability. Universities should integrate corpus-based resources and authentic input (films, podcasts, native texts) to expose learners to natural use of PVs. Students should be encouraged to keep personal vocabulary notebooks, practice paraphrasing, and engage in self-assessment to monitor PV learning.

Keywords - Phrasal Verbs (PVs), Syntactic and Semantic Structure, Word Structure, Phrase.

1. Introduction

Native English speakers are found to use phrasal verbs regularly in the English language. Phrasal verbs are verbs that carry a specific meaning that cannot be referred to by analyzing the meaning of their constituent words. They are



slightly found in the Arabic language. Nevertheless, phrasal verbs are a vital part of the English language vocabulary and are a basic part of this language's history, heritage, and culture. Phrasal verbs are extremely important in English verbal communication; therefore, native English speakers use phrasal verbs when they communicate spontaneously and daily. In linguistic studies, it is argued that phrasal verbs add flavor and taste to communication and speech. Thus, learning to understand and use phrasal verbs is necessary in order to achieve native like English language communication. Nevertheless, learning the meaning of phrasal verbs and their proper use is not as easy as one might think. English language students and learners usually lack the ability to understand the meaning of phrasal verbs when communicating in the English language, and find it difficult to communicate using phrasal verbs properly and efficiently. Most English language learners, especially Arabic mother tongue speakers, find phrasal verbs to be extremely difficult and uneasy, unlike native English speakers, who use them subconsciously and almost every day. Recognizing the meanings of phrasal verbs, which are commonly used in the English language, as well as being capable of using phrasal verbs, should be regarded as an essential part of English learning in a second language? Despite this, however, phrasal verbs are found to be among the most common English second/foreign language learning difficulties. Since phrasal verbs are an integral part of the English language, their essential feature of English language is utilized by native speakers in everyday life. English language learners face difficulties in comprehending and using phrasal verbs; their main obstacle is the native speaker's use of phrasal verbs. Learners will encounter phrasal verbs in authentic contexts.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Phrasal verbs (PVs) is a modern problematic linguistics issue needs to identify, as it is noticed that, native English language speakers are capable of using phrasal verbs in daily life speaking and authentic materials while ESL learners avoid using them due to difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases e.g. verb + preposition, verb + particle, separable and inseparable, compositional and non compositional in addition to the lack of knowledge and complexity of phrasal verbs structure.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The study is purposed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Investigating the problem of using English language Phrasal verbs (PVs) among Third-Year Students in the Department of English Language.
2. Clarifying the avoidance of using phrasal verbs (PVs) due to the difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases.
3. Viewing the phrasal verbs (PVs) structure and its syntactic and semantic characteristics.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant due to its first investigation in the University of Kordofan, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language, and by trying to investigate the Adversity of comprehending and using English Language Phrasal Verbs (PVs) among Students at the Tertiary Level. Furthermore, it can help syllabus designers and curriculum makers to design suitable syllabi by using this study, which helps non native English language learners improve their English language skills. The study can also be a motive for the researchers to carry on further studies in these areas.

2. Reviewing the Literature

2.1. Phrasal Verbs

A phrasal verb consists of a verb combined with one or more particles (prepositions or adverbs), resulting in a meaning that is often not transparent from its parts. For instance, the verb "give up" means "to quit," which is semantically unrelated to either "give" or "up" in isolation. This semantic shift is what makes many phrasal verbs idiomatic. They are "a very distinctive feature of English" according to Celle Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999; p. 412). They are also often difficult for non-native speakers. Their idiomatic characteristics, syntactic variability and semantic opacity have made them a problem that needs to be solved in both linguistic theory and pedagogic practice. They said

in their conclusion (1999, pp.412-3), "Phrasal verbs are a sort of language stumbling block for those learning English from scratch because meaning can't be guessed and grammar is fuzzy." The purpose of this review is to provide an extensive investigation into the category systems for phrasal verbs and an exploration of the many ways they cause difficulties for learners in their acquisition and use. The paper synthesizes perspectives from grammarians, applied linguists and language educators in order to elucidate how phrasal verbs are categorized and discusses the challenges both cognitive and pedagogical that this poses.

2.2. Challenges in Using Phrasal Verbs

It is considerably more difficult for tertiary- level students to actively employ these multi-word expressions, in either speaking or writing. Section 3 examines the source of these problems, revealing how learners have great difficulty incorporating phrasal verbs into the normal fluency of their language production and consequent effects this has upon communicative competence and written work at university level.

2.3. Avoidance in Speaking Due to Insecurity or Uncertainty

Phrasal verbs are avoided in deliberately on't because many learners worry about how to use them properly. This phenomenon occurs where a certain term is not used (known as "lexical avoidance"), and is a frequently mentioned fact in second language acquisition research. According to Hulstijn and Marchena (1989, p. 248), Dutch learners of English would always avoid using the correct phrasal verb at all times, preferring instead to say everything as a single word. Thus, the avoidance strategy of learners can seem unfamiliar to some even when they understand the meaning. This cautionariness yields unnatural-sounding sentences which, though syntactically correct, lack idiomaticity. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2008, p. 38) observed, shunning phrasal verbs in this way stigmatizes L2 speakers as overly formal or robotic in their speech.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This descriptive quantitative study is combined with classroom observations—which have an added qualitative component. Through a structured questionnaire, all levels of comprehension and frequency in usage can be statistically analyzed according to students' learning strategies. Qualitative observation is also factored in—it contributes local color to the data. This could mean seeing students in action with their phrasal verb lessons; understanding how they are taught or discussed by teachers (and other learners); even just getting a feel for what attacks that work best in one classroom may not suit another. Such an approach using mixed methods guarantees that any researcher can discover the phenomenon under scrutiny in terms of its broad outline and detailed content.

3.2. Population

The subjects were 200 undergraduates taking English language and linguistics at the tertiary level. This group generally has already completed courses in grammar, reading and vocabulary—areas where phrasal verbs are frequently met at some point. This population also included a percentage of the teachers who were involved as context providers during observation.

3.3. Sample Size and Technique

After a simple random sample of 40 students was selected from this population: on-site field visits took place some information gathering questionnaires were administered (hence providing data for further analysis). Considerations when choosing the size of this sample include its adequacy for descriptive analysis and the ease with which such size can managed in depth observations.

3.4. Instruments of Data Collection

Two primary instruments were utilized:

3.4.1 The Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was developed and validated to collect quantitative data regarding:

- Student demographic profiles and language backgrounds

- Familiarity and frequency of encountering phrasal verbs
- Specific comprehension challenges and usage errors
- Preferred learning strategies and sources of input

The instrument comprised 30 items distributed across five thematic sections, utilizing both Likert scale and multiple choice formats to ensure robust data capture.

3.4.2. Classroom Observation Checklist

To complement the questionnaire, an observation checklist was used to examine real-time classroom interactions. The checklist included indicators such as:

- Frequency of phrasal verb instruction
- Contexts in which phrasal verbs are used or avoided
- Student participation and error patterns
- Instructor correction methods and strategies used

Non-participant observation was conducted across six sessions over a two-week period.

4. Methods of Data Analysis

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to analyze the data. The next things were done: Descriptive statistics such as (means, frequencies and standard deviations) were used to find general response patterns. Observation data were examined using qualitative thematic analysis, which identifies themes that appear frequently in both the learners' behaviour and teacher's feedback about phrasal verbs.

4.1. Validity

Content validity was established through consultation with three academic experts on applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Clear points were drawn from the questionnaire items according to research aims and literature benchmarks in order to guarantee their relevance and scope.

4.2. Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Students at the Tertiary Level Face Difficulties in Comprehending and Using English Language Phrasal Verbs

Verbs		
Options	Number	Percentage
Agree	37	92.5%
Disagree	1	2.5%
Not sure	2	5.0%
Total	40	100%
Chi-square	63.05	

Table 1 reveals that a significant majority of respondents (92.5%, n=37) affirmed that students at the tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English phrasal verbs. In contrast, only 5% (n=2) disagreed, and 2.5% (n=1) remained uncertain. This finding reflects a deep-rooted challenge where the structural complexity and idiomaticity of phrasal verbs impede learners' ability to grasp and apply them effectively, especially in academic and professional settings.

Table 2: Students' Misunderstanding of Phrasal Verbs Due To Their Idiomatic Meanings/Usage

Options	Number	Percentage
Agree	30	75.0%
Disagree	6	15.0%
Not sure	4	10.0%
Total	40	100%
Chi square		31.04

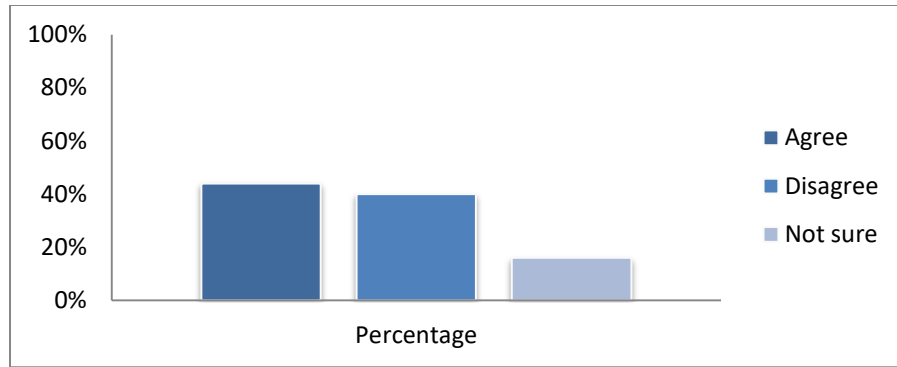


Fig. 1 Students' Misunderstanding of Phrasal Verbs Due To Their Idiomatic Meanings/Usage

Table 2 indicates that 87.5% of respondents (n=35) agreed that students misunderstand phrasal verbs because of their idiomatic usage, while 7.5% (n=3) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were uncertain. This result underscores the inherent difficulty posed by non-literal expressions in second language learning, where students struggle to derive meaning from structures that deviate from conventional grammatical logic.

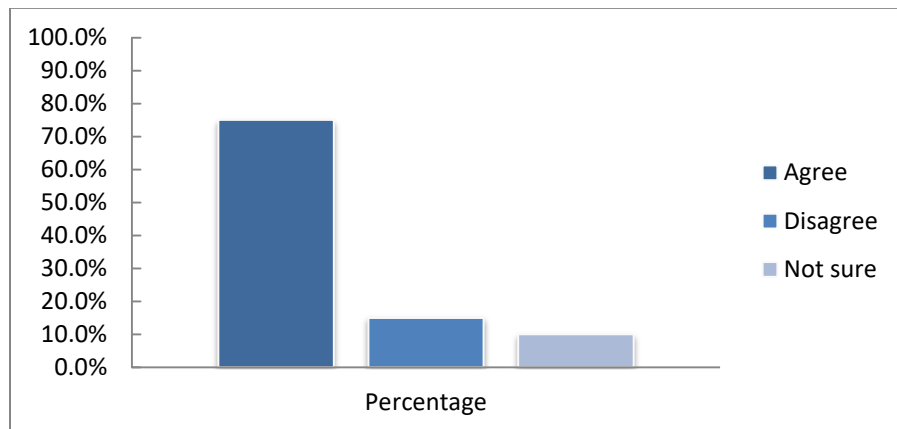


Fig. 2 Students' Misunderstanding of Phrasal Verbs Due To Their Idiomatic Meanings/Usage

Table 3: Many Tertiary Students Face Challenges in Interpreting Phrasal Verbs in Reading Materials

Options	Number	Percentage
Agree	30	81.1%
Disagree	4	10.8%
Not sure	3	8.1%
Total	37	100%
Chi square		38.0

According to Table 3 a high proportion of respondents (90%, n=36) agreed that students face challenges interpreting phrasal verbs in reading materials. Meanwhile, 5% (n=2) disagreed, and another 5% (n=2) were not sure. This highlights how textual complexity, especially in academic reading, exacerbates learners' difficulty with phrasal verbs, often resulting in misinterpretation and reduced reading comprehension.

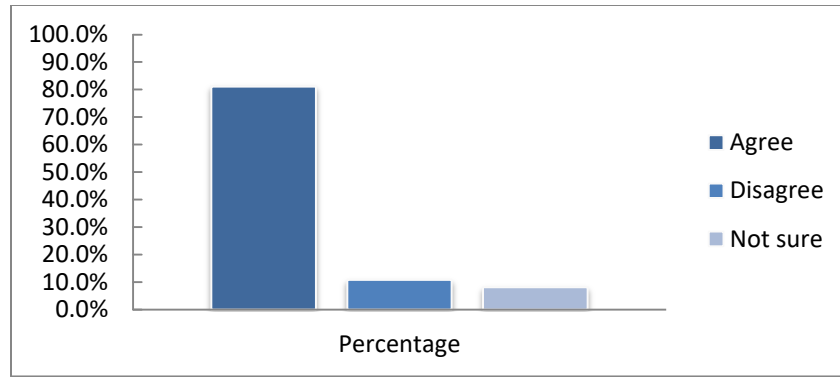


Fig. 3 Many Tertiary Students Face Challenges in Interpreting Phrasal Verbs in Reading Materials

Table 4: The Multiple Meanings of Some Phrasal Verbs Create Confusion among Learners

Options	Number	Percentage
Agree	35	87.5%
Disagree	2	5.0%
Not sure	3	7.5%
Total	40	100%
Chi-square		52.85

Table 4 shows that 85% of respondents (n=34) agreed that the multiple meanings of certain phrasal verbs confuse students, while 10% (n=4) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were not sure. This reflects a lexical ambiguity that impedes semantic clarity for learners, who often lack the contextual sensitivity required to distinguish among varied usages of a single verb particle combination.

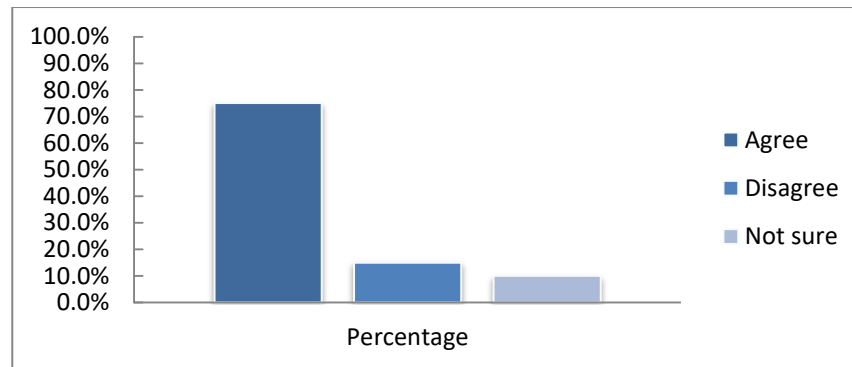


Fig. 4 The Multiple Meanings of Some Phrasal Verbs Create Confusion Among Learners

Table 5: The Difference Between Literal And Figurative Meanings Of Phrasal Verbs Is Difficult To Grasp

Options	Number	Percentage
Agree	29	72.5%
Disagree	4	10.0%
Not sure	7	17.5%
Total	40	100%
Chi-square		27.95

As shown in Table 5, the majority of respondents (87.5%, n=35) agreed that students struggle with distinguishing between literal and figurative meanings of phrasal verbs. In comparison, 7.5% (n=3) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were uncertain. This finding indicates that cognitive and linguistic constraints inhibit learners from transferring meaning across figurative contexts, resulting in limited comprehension and inaccurate usage.

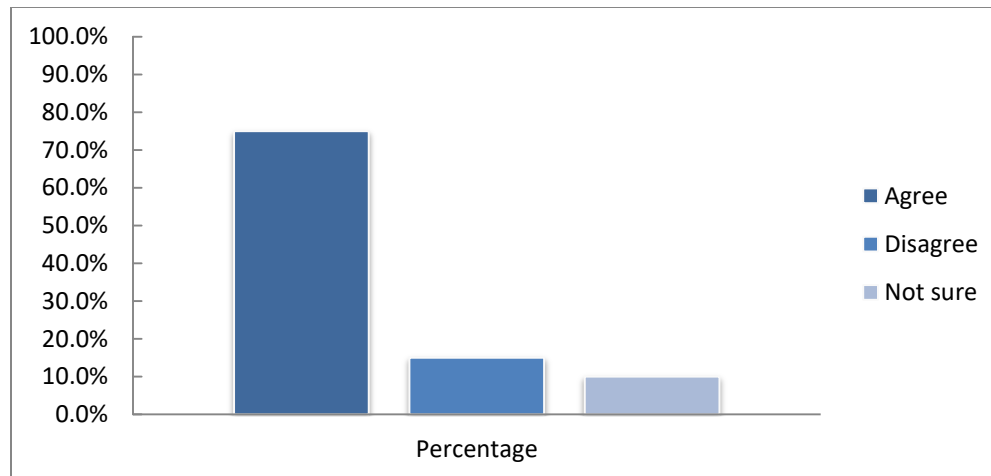


Fig. 5 The Difference between Literal and Figurative Meanings of Phrasal Verbs Is Difficult To Grasp

5. Conclusion

To explore the challenges faced by tertiary-level students in learning and using English phrasal verbs (PVs), this study was initiated. The background argued that phrasal verbs, although at the center of English communication, are among the most difficult aspects as far as EFL learners in particular those of Arabic-speaking background would comprehend or use them. The main obstacle is that they are difficult to subordinate, categorized as semantic irregularity, syntactic variability, and a number of meanings. Statements within the Problem identified the features of students' good command in using PVs as well as its frequent abuse and inability to integrate either written or spoken communication with ease. The study asked questions that designed to investigate difficulties faced by students in understanding and using phrasal verbs, structural complexities and how much they really have trouble with their acquisition. The research used a descriptive approach and the research methods employed were both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (classroom observation). The survey was organized into forty students, with data analysis carried out using SPSS to give a descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the data. The reliability and validity of the research instruments employed were verified. The literature review gave an Overview of approaches as well as key theoretical concepts from theories such as interlanguage theory, cognitive linguistics, usage-based approaches to language learning, the noticing hypothesis, and socio-cultural theories. Benefits of previous research studies include the following. Separable compound verbs systemically pose a challenge for EFL learners on semantic grounds, syntactic variability stems from this problem; secondly, L1 language interference; and finally pragmatic inappropriateness. Traditional teaching methods are inadequate to meet this challenge as shown by previous research.

Even more than these are required it would seem. Data analysis in Chapter Four revealed that an overwhelming majority of students struggle with phrasal verbs. Over ninety percent were of the opinion that PVs are hard to learn and use. Idiomaticity, multiple meanings and differences between literal meaning and figurative one--these are three hurdles in PV- learning that most students face with mounting suspicion. And there were many instances where students replaced PVs with single-word synonyms in both speech and writing. Other students furthermore were not really able to use them rather than avoid or misuse them. These included mis-usage, neglect for spoken forms, and such cramped classroom situations. Curriculum developers should encourage greater use of authentic language patterns, adopt more comprehensive teaching methods, and give PVs core status in their planning for pedagogy since these are important factors leading to inadequacy. Observational data showed that students were hesitant, avoided, even afraid when learning in the classroom environment where Sum, The study confirmed these hypotheses, that PV were difficult for EFL students because of: L1 interference, a lack of exposure and poor teaching methods. It offers some help on the thorny issue of how to deal with this for people specializing in either English or Education in general. As a result the research contributes to our knowledge of this very problem in Sudanese tertiary education. We hope that it will be of temporary help to teachers, students and planners.

5.1. Results

The main findings of the survey can be summarized as follows:

1. 92.5% of respondents reported that PVs are problematic for tertiary learners, both in terms of understanding and use.
2. 87.5% of students had difficulty getting the meaning behind idiomatic expressions.
3. This confirms semantic opacity as one big problem PV creates. 85% found multiple meanings confusing
4. Over 72% of students reported that they could not distinguish literal from figurative uses of PVs; this meant misinterpretations in reading and speaking alike. This problem is discussed in greater detail below. 80% couldn't tell whether a separable or inseparable PV to use.
5. In both examples they fail to build a grammatical structure correctly and are therefore meaningless sentence fragments. 90% of students reported that they did not feel very confident using PVs in an academic context and 85 percent said their nervousness increased when they had to do so.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, we make recommendations as follows:

1. Integration with academic curricula. Phrasal verbs should be systematically included in English learning materials at tertiary level institutions. Specific teaching objectives should be set for plot and productive skills separately
2. Teachers should put emphasis on teaching PVs in authentic contexts--dialogues, stories or role plays--so that they will stick and be useful for the students
3. Universities should build up their own corpus data and genuine language materials (e.g., films, podcasts or statements) to let learners see the natural use of PVs.
4. Instruction should combine explicit instruction in grammar (separable/inseparable forms, transitivity) with communicative activities to develop both accuracy and fluency.
5. English teachers should receive professional development training in new techniques for PV teaching, including the use of cognitive metaphors and other approaches.

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