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The Impact of Phrasal Verb Avoidance on the Writing Ability of the University EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study endeavors to investigate the impact of phrasal verb avoidance on the writing ability of Persian learners of English. To accomplish this, three elicitation tests were administered, eliciting preference for either a phrasal verb or an equivalent one-word verb. The total mean score of the participants was used as a criterion to form two groups. Participants whose scores fell below the mean were places in Group A (participants with higher amount of avoidance) and those whose score fell above the mean were placed in Group B (participants with lower amount of avoidance). Then the participants were then asked to perform a writing task. An independent-samples T-test was run. The results revealed that the participants in group B had a better performance than those in group A.

Keywords: Avoidance; Phrasal verb; Phrasal verb avoidance; Persian EFL learners; Writing ability

1. Introduction

The fundamental question in the field of second language acquisition is how learners acquire a second language. It has been thought that the errors second language learners make can provide a window to the understanding of the internal processes of second language acquisition (Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1972; Schachter, 1974). Error analysis is one of the significant approaches in the analysis of learner difficulty in acquiring a second language, which attempted to empirically investigate the actual errors produced by second language learners in the target language and sought to explain their cause. However, a drawback has been pointed out concerning this approach.

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1. Introduction

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Schachter (1974) argued that the error analysis approach is deficient because it is incapable of explaining the phenomenon of avoidance. The explanation for this phenomenon is that second language learners will often try to avoid using a difficult item or structure in the second language, and will instead use an alternative item or structure, which they perceive as simpler.

The theoretical rationale for considering phrasal verbs in the investigation of the avoidance phenomenon is that Persian learners of English often confront difficulties with identifying, learning and ultimately using these verbs. In their performance especially while writing in English, these learners tend to avoid this linguistic category and use the one-word verb instead. By frequently resorting to this strategy, two problems appear: Firstly, the learner will not improve in that specific area; and secondly, if the errors are overlooked actively, they may become fossilized.

The aim of current research was to investigate the impact of phrasal verb avoidance on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. In order to accomplish this purpose, the following research questions were developed:

1. To what extent do Persian learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs?
2. Does their avoidance, if any, have any positive/negative effect on their writing performance?

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. THE AVOIDANCE STRATEGY

In order to explain the avoidance behavior by L2 learners, two important claims have been made. One is that avoidance takes place when there are structural differences between L1 and L2. Within this view, avoidance is predictable by Contrastive Analysis (Schachter, 1974; Kleinman, 1977; Daught & Laufer, 1985). The other maintains that avoidance is governed by universal principles. Within this view, avoidance is predictable on the basis of the semantic difficulty of L2 forms in question (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989).

Schachter (1974) examined Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Arabic learners’ avoidance of relative clauses. She concluded that if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it.

Further, Kleinman (1977) examined four English grammatical structures performed by intermediate level native speakers of Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese. The findings lend support to Schachter’s (1974) claim that avoidance can be predicted by the structural differences between the first and the second language. However, there is an interaction between linguistic and psychological factors.

Mehrpooya (2002) investigated the use of avoidance strategy by Iranian EFL learners when producing different idioms. The results indicated that the EFL learners’ use of avoidance strategy was more evident when the idioms were mostly different from the idioms in their L1.

On the other hand, some researchers asserted that the structural difference between L1 and L2 alone may not be the only reason for avoidance. Bley-Vroman and Houng (1988) proposed that the low production rate of English relative clauses by the Chinese learners would be an indication of the low frequency of relative clauses in Chinese. In different study, Li (1996) found that learners did not necessarily avoid structures that were apparently different in form from their L1. He concluded that subtle pragmatic differences made them subconsciously underproduce relative clauses.

Pazhakh (2006) explored the avoidance phenomena in English writings by intermediate and advanced Iranian EFL learners. He found that avoidance is inversely related to English proficiency level. Besides, language proficiency level, there are many other factors influencing students’ avoidance behaviors, such as the nature of the problem source, the learner’s personality, and the learning situation.

1.1.2. AVOIDANCE OF PHRASAL VERBS

One feature of English which many L2 learners find difficult is phrasal verbs. Research indicates that the difficult nature of these verbs may lead to avoidance causing learners to choose a single word synonym instead. Three common main reasons were given for possible avoidance: “(a) L1-L2 difference, (b) L1-L2 idiomatic similarity, and (c) inherent L2 complexity” (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1983; Liao & Fukuya, 2004).
Research on the avoidance of English phrasal verbs was first conducted by Dagut and Laufer (1985). In their research, they observed a group of Hebrew-speaking students of English. The results of the study demonstrated that the majority of learners exhibited a strong preference for one-word verbs. They attributed this finding to L1–L2 structural differences.

Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) hypothesized that Dutch learners would still avoid phrasal verbs, not for structural reasons as the Hebrew learners did, but for semantic reasons. Their study offered two results about avoidance strategy. First, Dutch learners avoided those idiomatic phrasal verbs that they perceived as too Dutch-like. Second, since their findings showed that idiomatic phrasal verbs are avoided more than figurative ones, they claimed that the L2 learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs mostly because of semantic considerations.

Laufer and Eliasson (1993) took up both Dagut and Laufer’s (1985) and Hulstijn and Marchena’s (1989) lines of argument. Their study with Swedish learners revealed that the best predictor for strategy of avoidance was differences between first and second language.

Similarly, Liao and Fukuya (2004) observed that Chinese intermediate learners produced phrasal verbs much less frequently than both native speakers and advanced learners. Therefore, they suggested that the avoidance or non-avoidance of phrasal verbs could be an indication of learners’ interlanguage development rather than the L1–L2 differences or similarities.

1.1.3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOCABULARY AND WRITING

The interactions between vocabulary and writing skills are twofold. On the one hand, writing practice contributes to the development of vocabulary. On the other hand, vocabulary use in writing enhances the quality of the written text. In his experiment with Japanese learners, Muncie (2002) found that vocabulary development correlates highly with writing practice. Similarly, a further study by Lee (2003) found that writing tasks maximize vocabulary learning opportunities and help learners develop L2 vocabulary by retaining new learned words.

The aforementioned research findings are indicative of the positive effect that writing has on vocabulary development. Vocabulary knowledge has been found to play an important role in writing as well. In an examination of learners’ views concerning their EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses, Leki and Carson (1994) found that vocabulary expansion was the key component needed to improve their writing performance. In a further experiment conducted by Polio and Glew (1996), students mentioned the importance of knowing appropriate vocabulary to write an essay and commented on the difficulties they confront when writing about a topic for which they lacked sufficient vocabulary. Therefore, based on what have been mentioned regarding the role of vocabulary, developing a large repertoire of vocabulary, including phrasal verbs, is crucial in achieving writing proficiency.

2. Method

2.1. PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the present study were 86 undergraduate students in the department of English Language and Literature at Guilan University. The main consideration when selecting the participants was their level of English proficiency. As the present study’s experimental materials involved structurally complex sentences, only learners at or above the intermediate level were included in our study. Accordingly, it was strictly controlled to include only intermediate level learners.

2.2. INSTRUMENTS

2.2.1. AN OXFORD PLACEMENT TEST

The participants’ level of proficiency was objectively confirmed by an OPT (Allan, 2004). Out of a total number of 86 participants who took the OPT, 44 ones were selected to take the main tests. The test was comprised of a 100-item multiple-choice Grammar Test, which consisted of several parts, testing different aspects of grammar.
2.2.2. A MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST

Fifteen pairs of phrasal and one-word verbs were selected for the multiple-choice test. The phrasal verbs and test sentences used in this study were selected from the book '1000 phrasal verbs in context' by Errey (2007) which contained phrasal verbs specifically designed for intermediate level learners. For these verb pairs, 15 sentences were created (see Appendix A). This set of 15 sentences was also used in the recall and translation tests. In each sentence of the multiple-choice test, the verb in question was left blank. The participants were required to fill in the blank with one of the four verbs presented below the sentence: the phrasal verb, the equivalent one-word verb, and two distractor verbs. Unlike a normal multiple-choice test, the present test consisted of not one but two correct answers.

The following two sentences appeared in the instructions: "Choose for each sentence the verb that in your opinion best fits the context and fill in that verb. Assume that these sentences have been written in normal, colloquial English" (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p.245).

2.2.3. A RECALL TEST

In this test, the participants were given the same 15 sentences as in the multiple-choice test, written out in full with the phrasal verb. Five distractor sentences with one-word verbs were added.

2.2.4. A TRANSLATION TEST

This test had the same 15 sentences as in the multiple-choice test, with the verb left out. At the end of each sentence, the Persian equivalent of the missing verb was given.

2.2.5. A WRITING TASK

This task contained a narrative composition on the topic, "If I Had a Million Dollars". The time allowed for the task was 40 minutes.

2.3. PROCEDURES

Stage 1: This step was conducted to find out whether and to what extent the phrasal verbs would be avoided by Persian learners of English. It consisted of the administration of three elicitation tests (a multiple-choice test, a verb translation test, and a recall test) to the participants.

Stage 2: Two weeks later, a recall test was administered to the students. At the beginning of the class session, the participants were asked to remember the main ideas of the sentences in about 10 minutes. After about 1 hour, they were given the same sentences, but this time with the verbs left out. They were given 10 minutes to fill in the verbs according to what they remembered. In order to prevent L1 influence, no Persian equivalents were given in this test.

Stage 3: At this stage, a translation test was given to the students. There was a two-week gap between the recall and the translation test. In this test, the participants were asked to translate the phrasal verbs given at the end of the sentences into English in the provided 10 minutes.

Stage 4: In this step, the participants’ performances on the elicitation tests were assessed to provide answer to the research question 1. Subsequently, based on their scores on the above mentioned tests, the participants were divided into two groups according to their amount of avoidance.

Stage 5: One week after the translation test, the participants were asked to write a narrative composition. At this stage, the functions of the two groups were compared according to their performance on the writing task.

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. To calculate the scores of the tests, the answers to each of the items, 1 to 15, were added up for each participant. The total possible number of correct answers was 45. Since there were two phrasal verbs among the four choices (one correct, one distractor),
only the correct phrasal verbs chosen by the participants were counted in the calculation. Then the total scores for each participant were calculated. To answer research question 1 and to further explore the choice between phrasal verbs and their one-word verb competitors, the relative proportion of occurrence of each was calculated.

After identifying the extent to which the participants resort to the avoidance strategy in using phrasal verbs, the next step followed was to investigate whether phrasal verb avoidance would affect the participants’ writing performances. To this end, the performance mean of the participants in the mentioned tests was computed. The participants' mean score was 6.37 out of 15. Participants whose scores fell below the mean were placed in Group A (participants with higher amount of avoidance) and those whose score fell above the mean were placed in Group B (participants with lower amount of avoidance). As previously stated, to accomplish this purpose the participants were asked to perform a writing task. The grading scale which was used to evaluate the writing tasks was the Weigle's (2004) essay scoring criteria (see Appendix B). To overcome the rater reliability problems, two independent raters were asked to evaluate the student’ written products. To estimate the inter-rater reliability, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (.74) was calculated which revealed substantial agreement between the raters. In order to statistically analyze the significant difference between the writing performances of the two groups, the analysis of independent-samples t-test was utilized. An alpha level of .05 was selected for rejecting the null hypothesis.

3. Results

Research Question 1: Do Persian learners of English avoid phrasal verbs?

To answer this research question, results from all three elicitation tests were analyzed. The results of the multiple choice test revealed that out of 660 possible uses of phrasal verbs (15 × 44) and one-word verbs, in 278 (42.12%) cases, the participants selected phrasal verbs. 338 (51.21%) answers showed the preference of the participants for one-word verbs and the 44 (6.66%) remaining cases comprised wrong responses.

The results of the recall test indicated that out of the total 660 (15 × 44) phrasal and one-word verbs, in 280 (42.42%) cases the participants preferred phrasal verbs. In 341 (51.66%) cases the participants used one-word verbs. The 39 (5.90%) remaining cases included the wrong responses.

Regarding the verb translation, the results showed that out of 660 possible (15 × 44) translations, in 283 (42.87%) cases the participants translated the Farsi verbs into a phrasal verb. In 356 (53.93%) cases the participants translated the Farsi verbs into a one-word verb. The 21 (3.18%) remaining cases were the wrong translations.

The scores of the three tests revealed that out of 1980 possibilities to choose phrasal verbs and one-word verbs, the participants selected phrasal verbs 42.47% of the time and one-word verbs 52.27% of the time, respectively. Evidently, the intermediate learners avoided using phrasal verbs and preferred the one-word verbs.

The L1-L2 structural difference (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya 2004) between Persian and English might be a reason for the avoidance of phrasal verbs by the intermediate learners. The phrasal verb structure is a peculiarity of the Germanic languages (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Darwin & Gary, 1999) which has no parallel in Persian. Furthermore, the combination of a verb and the particle following it never forms a semantic meaning which differs from the usual meanings of its individual parts. Therefore, in comparing the verb system of the two languages, the English phrasal verbs are left over with no Persian equivalents and it is not correct to list the English phrasal verbs such as: get over, look into, stand for and come about as the perfect correspondents to /behbud ya:ftan/ (recover); /bar-resi kardan/ (investigate) /nesha:n da:dan/ (represent); and /ettefaq ofta:dan/ (happen) respectively (Fallahi,1991; as cited in Moghimizadeh, 2007). Because of this L1-L2 difference, the syntactic and semantic functioning of the particles in English phrasal verbs may be confusing to Persian learners of English.

It is equally important to note that in addition to inter-lingual factors, the participants’ resistance to phrasal verbs can be explained in terms of the difficult nature of these verbs. As a result of these complexities, when speaking or writing in English a Persian learner finds it difficult to understand and produce phrasal verbs and prefers the alternative single word equivalents.
Besides the reasons mentioned above, there exist additional factors for adopting avoidance strategies. As cited by Pazhakh (2006), internal factors such as the teachers and students’ attitudes toward errors, the fear of difficulties, and the playing safe strategy are also influential in resorting to this strategy.

**Research Question 2: Does their avoidance, if any, have any positive/negative effect on their writing performance?**

To respond to this research question and to discover whether any significant difference existed between the writing ability of the two groups, the participants were asked to perform a writing task. As Table 3.1 suggests, the results indicated a statistically significant difference between the scores of the two groups (sig = .000 < 0.05).

Table 1. Independent Samples Test

|                  | t     | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|------------------|-------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Equal variances assumed | -3.941 | .000            | -2.63251        |
| Equal variances not assumed | -3.901 | .000            | -2.63251        |

To further investigate which group had a better performance in the writing task, each groups’ mean score was taken into consideration. As obvious from Table 3.2, the performance of the two groups differed widely. Since Group B’s mean is higher than Group A’s mean, it can be claimed that the participants in Group B had a better performance than the participants in Group A. Drawing from this finding, it can be concluded that there exists a close relationship between phrasal verb avoidance and the participants’ writing ability. In fact, phrasal verb avoidance negatively affected the participants’ writing performance.

Table 2. Group Statistics

|       | N   | Mean   | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-------|-----|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| Group A | 23  | 27.3913| 1.96536        | .40981          |
| Group B | 21  | 30.0238| 2.45701        | .53616          |

4. Conclusions

This study explored phrasal verb avoidance by Iranian EFL learners. It also provided insights into the consequences that phrasal verb avoidance has on the writing ability of the L2 learners, thereby extending previous research which has only focused on establishing the avoidance concept and trying to improve its classification.

The findings of this research offer insights to language teachers. It is very worthwhile for teachers to realize the role of avoidance strategy in the improvement of EFL learners especially while teaching writing.

Test developers would utilize the findings of this research since by identifying the phrasal verbs which Persian EFL learners tend to avoid, they may focus on these verbs in evaluation. Moreover, it would be essential to include an assessment of the learners’ ability to use phrasal verbs in proficiency tests. More weight may need to be put on the learners’ ability to use formulaic sequences including phrasal verbs to arrive at a more accurate evaluation of the learners’ proficiency level.

4.1. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Certain suggestions can be made for further research. In the present study, the effect of phrasal verb avoidance was investigated only on one skill known as writing, while further research can open new avenues of research into other areas such as listening, reading, speaking and so forth.

Moreover, when studying the avoidance phenomenon, attention needs to be paid to all those features which may interact with this factor in complex ways. The need for further research in this area goes without saying. Especially
useful would be replication and expansion of the present study to include affective variables such as risk-taking, about which relatively little is known concerning second language learners. Further, final conclusions cannot be drawn only from quantitative measurement. More qualitative analyses of phrasal verb avoidance are still needed and are certain to provide new insightful evidence on this issue.

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Appendix A. Test Sentences

After each sentence the following information is added in parentheses: in order of their appearance, the four alternative verbs presented in the multiple-choice test; following the slash, the Persian equivalent presented in the translation test (in infinitival form).

1. Jason felt terrible after he failed his exam. He said he'd ________ his family, his teachers and all the friends who'd helped him study.
   (discard, disappoint, let down, carry on/ ناملاید کردن )
2. Today I ________ a cousin I hadn't seen for years. It was good to see each other after such a long time.
   (went over, ran into, met, applauded/ ملاقات کردن)
3. The reception in the garden was ________ because of a thunderstorm.
   (canceled, went off, called off, encountered/ نفو شدن)
4. Jenny and Kate used to be close friends, but they've ________ over the years. They hardly ever see each other these days.
   (grown apart, separated, gone without, secluded/ جدا شدن)
5. Many people ________ at the product launch because of the free drinks.
6. Fortunately, there weren't that many people in the building when the bomb ________.
(claimed, appeared, showed up, looked up/حضرت یافتند)

7. Alex was late for school, so he ________ a story about traffic jam.
(invented, made up, followed, looked over/از خود در آوردن/)

8. When you are a chain-smoker it is incredibly difficult to ________ smoking.
(eliminate, stop, fall down, give up/ترک کردن)

9. Parents should do their best to ________ their children to be honest.
(dismiss, raise, bring up, come across/پذیرش)

10. We are having a great time in France. I hope we can ________ again next year.
(take up, come back, return, leave/پذیرش)

11. We can't ________ the heat any longer. We're going to buy an air conditioner.
(bear, get over, bewilder, put up with/تحمل کردن)

12. Mr. Jones wanted to catch the train to London. He was late and he didn't know which platform the London train left from. He ________ which platform by asking a ticket collector.
(abandoned, discovered, find out, tried out/بزرگشتن)

13. We can't ________ much longer. If we don't get the deal soon, we will give up.
(hold on, starve, wait, go off/صبر کردن)

14. The waiters ________ the dirty dishes and wiped down the table before serving and dessert and coffee.
(removed, drop in, took away, mix/برداشتی)

15. The children ________ the bar from the back door.
(appeared, entered, put up, came in/وارد شدن)

Appendix B. Essay Scoring Criteria, Adapted from S.C. Weigle (2004), Assessing Writing, 9 (27-55)

| Rhetoric: Content | Rhetoric: Organization | Language: Accuracy | Language: Range and complexity |
|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 9-10              | 9-10                   | 9-10               | 9-10                          |
| The treatment of the assignment completely fulfills the task expectations and the topic is addressed. | Clear and Appropriate organization plan. | The essay is clearly written with few errors; errors do not interfere with comprehension | The essay uses a variety of sentence types accurately. |
| Fully developed range evidence for generalizations and | Effective introduction and | Includes consistently | Uses a wide range of |
| Supporting Ideas Provided in a Relevant and Credible Way | Conclusion | Accurate Word Forms and Verb Tenses | Academic Vocabulary |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Uses Ideas from Source Text Well to Support Thesis.     | Connections Between and Within Paragraphs Are Made Through Effective and Varied Use of Transition and Other Cohesive Devices. | Word Choices Are Accurate and Appropriate. | Source Text Language Is Used Sparingly and Accurately Incorporated Into Writer’s Own Words. |
| 7-8                                                      | 7-8        | 7-8                                | 7-8                 |
| The Treatment of the Assignment Fulfills the Task Expectations Completely and the Topic Is Addressed Clearly. | Clear Organization Plan | The Essay Is Clearly Written But Contains Some Errors Which Do Not Interfere With Comprehension. | The Essay Uses a Variety of Sentence Types. |
| Evidence for Generalizations and Supporting Ideas Is Provided in a Relevant and Credible Way. | Satisfactory Introduction and Conclusion | The Essay May Contain Some Errors in Word Choice, Word Form, Verb Tenses, and Comprehension. | Good Range of Vocabulary Used With at Most a Few Lapses in Register. |
| Ideas from Source Text Used to Support Thesis.          | Satisfactory Connections Between and Within Paragraphs Using Transitions and Other Cohesive Devices. | | Some Language from the Source Text May Be Present But Is Generally Well Incorporated Into Writer’s Own Words. |
| 5-6                                                      | 5-6        | 5-6                                | 5-6                 |
| The Treatment of the Assignment Minimally Fulfills the Task Expectations; Some of the Task May Be Slighted. | Adequate but Simplistic Organizational Plan | Is Generally Comprehensible but Contains Some Errors That Distract the Reader; at Most a Few Errors Interfere With Comprehension. | Somewhat Limited Range of Sentence Types; May Avoid Complex Structures. |
| Some Evidence for Generalizations and Supporting Ideas Is Provided | Introduction and Conclusion Present But May Be Brief. | The Essay May Contain Some Errors in Word Choice, Word Form, Verb Tenses, and Comprehension. | Somewhat Limited Range of Vocabulary |
| Ideas from source text are included but may not be explicitly acknowledged as such. | Connections between and within paragraphs occasionally missing | May include extensive language from source texts with an attempt to incorporate text own language |
|---|---|---|
| 3-4 | 3-4 | 3-4 |
| The treatment of the assignment only partially fulfills the task expectations and the topic is not always addressed clearly. | Organization plan hard to follow | Uses a limited number of sentence types. |
| Evidence for generalizations limited, and supporting ideas is insufficient and irrelevant. | Introduction and conclusion may be missing or inadequate. | Includes many errors in word choice, word form, verb tenses, and complementation. |
| May not include ideas from source text, or may consist primarily of ideas from source text without | Connections between and within paragraphs frequently missing | Extensive use of source text language with little integration with writer's words. |
| 1-2 | 1-2 | 1-2 |
| The treatment of the assignment fails to fulfill the task expectations and the paper lacks writing. | No apparent organization plan | Use simplistic and repetitive vocabulary that may not be appropriate for academic focus. |
| Evidence for generalizations and supporting ideas is insufficient and irrelevant. | Introduction and conclusion missing or clearly inappropriate. | Includes many errors in word choice, word form, verb tenses, and complementation. |
| Few connections between and within paragraphs | Does not vary sentence types sufficiently. | May rely almost exclusively on source text language |