

English Phrasal Verbs and the Arab Learner

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Abstract

Many Arab students learning English as a foreign language face different types of difficulties as a result of wide differences between English and Arabic (their mother tongue) in almost all areas phonological, morphological and syntactic. English phrasal verbs (Verb + particle) represent one of the most different areas of learning English for Arab students. Basically, this is due to the fact that this linguistic phenomenon (the phrasal verbs) is more common in English than in Arabic. Moreover, although these verbs are rare in Arabic, they differ to a long extent from the English Phrasal verbs in their structure, distribution and idiomatic meaning. The study has shown that this important area of the English language has been neglected by both English Language teachers and syllabus designers in almost all stages, especially the university stage. This has been reflected on students' performance. Therefore, they suffer a lot in understanding and using these verbs. So, the present study recommends that more attention should be given to the teaching of these verbs. This can be done through the development of new syllabi which take into consideration both the structural and functional aspects of these English phrasal verbs. They must be introduced and taught in real life situations which highlight their importance for a native like mastery of English.

Introduction

This paper investigates the degree of difficulty English phrasal verbs pose for Arab students specializing in English and Arabic/English/Arabic translation, the reasons why these learners misuse these very important linguistic phenomena, or tend to avoid using them in favour of single words that may not be spontaneous or native - like. In the light of a specially designed test, these learners' inadequacies in using phrasal verbs are diagnosed and discussed, and then suggestions are offered as to the best possible ways of assimilating these common expressions in modern English speech and writing

The Problem:

The Arab learner has always faced difficulties with English, particularly phrasal verbs, due to the fact that these linguistic phenomena, or verb-particle combinations, do not exist in his mother tongue in the same way as they do in the foreign language and they are less common in Arabic than in English. He, therefore, tends to avoid their use altogether in his speech and writing, or gets them wrong whenever they occur either consciously or spontaneously in his oral or written performance in English. He normally opts for the use of the main verb only, leaving out the particle that should go with it, and when he manages to come up with a particle after the main verb, it is usually the wrong one. Sometimes, he gets the verb preceding the particle wrong, which is a lexical error, and manages to choose the correct particle; the result in this case sounds or reads unacceptable.

Most Arab learners of English, especially those we have in mind for the purpose of this study, know or should know the meaning of a phrasal verb in English. They know, or should know that it is, usually, a combination of a simple, monosyllabic verb like get, put, take etc. and a particle like, on, up, out etc. (McArthur **et al** 1974:5). This combination is described as phrasal because it is in fact a two - word phrase and not a single item. Whether the two words occur side by side with the verb preceding and the particle following, or are separated by other words in the context, again with the verb coming first and the particle next (McArthur **et al**, 1974:5).

The Arab learners we have in mind, whom we shall attempt to describe later in this investigation, should also know that phrasal verbs are very common in modern English speech and writing. "It is probably true that the children of English - speaking people learn phrasal verbs earlier than any other kind of verb" (McArthur **et al**, 1974:5). These linguistic

phenomena are mainly colloquial idiomatic expressions the familiarity with which is essential to the mastery of the English language, and the ability to use them appropriately in context is among the distinguishing features of a nativlike performance in English. (Cowie and Mackin 1975:VI).

The Experiment

Since the English phrasal verbs are important to the native-like command of the language, we set out to discover the extent to which a representative sample of them is assimilated by a group of students who embarked on their M.A. course in English and Arabic/English/Arabic Translation at our Centre in september, 1985. They were eighteen students altogether and they were all holders of a B.A. in English Language and Literature. Some of them also hold a postgraduate diploma in English and Education. They are supposed to be the best students we have in English. Due to their background in this language, these M.A. students were expected to be quite familiar with a large number of phrasal verbs; they were expected to feel quite at home with the spontaneous and correct use of many phrasal verb. To find out whether or not our expectations were justified, we administered a test which was especially designed to focus on some of the common phrasal verbs in English - those which we thought the students should be able to recognize and know how to use correctly and spontaneously in the light of their extensive background in English referred to above.

The Test consisted of four papers, the first one of which contained twenty-five sentences each with a blank spece the testees were asked to fill in those blanks with the help of the meaning given in brackets after each sentence. (See the Appendix). Our intention was to find out if the informants would use phrasal verbs correctly or opt out for single words instead, i.e. avoid using phrasal verbs intentionally or becuae of ignorance of them. (Dagut and Laufer 1985: 73-8). Paper Two of the test presented again twenty-five other sentences each with a blank space, and the testees were again asked to fill in these blanks, but they were offered no help or guidance. The intention here was again to see if those blanks would be filled with phrasal verbs or single words. Paper Three comprised twenty-five other sentences with the phrasal verbs underlined. The informants were asked to replace those underlined phrases with other words or phrases wich meant almost the same. The intention here was two-fold: first, to bring to the informants' attention twenty-five fairly common phrasal verbs and secondly, to find out if they really knew their meaning. Paper Four presented the testees with twenty-five fairly

common phrasal verbs in five groups which were combinations of the simple, monosyllabic verbs (check, get, let, put and take), each followed by the same members of a set of particles (in, off, on, up and out). The informants were asked either to give the meaning in English of each of those phrasal verbs, or use it in a sentence to explain its idiomatic meaning. This option was given because we did not want the fact that those phrasal verbs were presented out of context to jeopardize our informants' chances of giving the correct answer. The intention of this test paper was obviously to see if our informants could recognize those common phrasal verbs, know what they meant, and use them in correct, meaningful sentences.

The test was administered in two separate sittings of one hour each: Papers One and Two were given first and then Papers Three and Four.

Answers to Papers One and Two were classified into correct answers and incorrect answers. The correct answers were sub-classified into correct phrasal verbs and avoidance of phrasal verbs. The incorrect answers were sub-classified into incorrect phrasal verbs and other incorrect answers. Answers to Papers Three and Four were classified into correct answers and incorrect answers. The results were then calculated with reference to the total number of 450 cases or answers for each paper ($18 \text{ students} \times 25 \text{ items} = 450$). Then figures were converted into percentages as can be seen in Tables 1-5.

Discussion of Results

The results of the test showed that the testees' overall command of this important area of English is poor. As can be seen from Table 5, which is a summary of the results of the four papers, only 476 cases (26.4%) out of 1800 cases (the total number of items answered by all testees in all papers)¹ were correct phrasal verbs. This means that in 1324 cases (73.6%), the testees either avoided using phrasal verbs, used incorrect ones or used incorrect single verbs or phrases.

Table 1, which summarizes the results of Paper One concerning use and avoidance of phrasal verbs with guidance provided, shows that out of a total of 450 cases ($25 \text{ items} \times 18 \text{ testees}$) only 193 cases were correct (42.9%) including only 73 correct phrasal verbs (16.2%). This means that in 26.7% of the cases, testees avoided using phrasal verbs, while 57% of the cases were incorrect answers. These included 35 unsuccessful attempts to use phrasal verbs (7.8%), while about 60% were wrong answers.

The results of Paper Two concerning use and avoidance of phrasal verbs without guidance revealed that the cases of avoidance of phrasal verbs more than doubled as Table 2 shows. They also showed a considerable increase in the use of correct (non-phrasal verb) lexical items. However, about 33% of the answers were incorrect. In short, the results of the first two papers proved that the testees tended to avoid using phrasal verbs and they demonstrated an apparent weakness in choosing appropriate lexical items, although they were postgraduate students of English and Translation.

The results of Paper Three, concerning student's understanding of phrasal verbs in context, were better than those obtained from the first two papers, concerning the production and spontaneous use of these verb. Nevertheless, they were far from being satisfactory. Table 3 shows that 41.1% of cases were correct, while 58.9% wrong.

In paper Four, which was concerned with the use of phrasal verbs or giving their meanings, the results were not any better than those obtained from the other papers. Only 38.9% of the answers provided were correct, while more than 61% were either incorrect or not provided at all, although those phrasal verbs were of the most common ones and almost all of them were included in the testees' secondary school textbooks.²

Conclusions

The present study indicates that Arab learners of English at all stages face serious problems with English phrasal verbs. The study also shows that these learners tend to avoid using phrasal verbs and prefer single verbs even though these may not be appropriate to the context.

The main reasons for this deficiency in the use of phrasal verbs, as we see them, are two. First, these very important linguistic items are either not taught properly in schools, colleges, universities, or they are not taught at all. Many Arab learners are not exposed long and often enough to these vital items in English speech and writing; this, of course, will be reflected on the teachers and texts used throughout the educational system in so far as English is concerned.³ The full value of phrasal verbs as items of extreme importance to the native-like mastery of English is, therefore, not realised by many Arab learners. The second reason for the deficiency is the influence of Arabic which has a totally different system of phrasal verbs with different emphases on their value and frequency. (See Note1). Many Arab learners tend to use translation in the hope of assimilating the English phrasal verbs and then using them correctly and freely; this is

likely to have disastrous consequences as we have seen from the findings of our Test above.

Recommendations

Having stated the reasons for the Arab learner's weakness in this very important area of English, we would like to recommend that phrasal verbs be given more attention in schools and higher academic institutions to offer learners a wider exposure to their spontaneous idiomatic use. It is also recommended that these items be introduced in class with special emphasis on their idiomatic meaning and use. The introduction of some exercises similar to those given in the Appendix would be of great help to learners of English. Moreover, syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers should be aware of the problems facing Arab students in this area; they should seize every opportunity to introduce them in contexts of meaningful and real-life situation, like using recorded conversations by native speakers, plays and, if possible, films, and then drawing the learners' attention to the phrasal verbs used. We feel that such a method would ensure the learners' comprehension and absorption of the most common phrasal verbs. Teachers should also warn learners of the dangers of literal translation of these items and that the meaning of each phrasal verb is not always the mere sum total or combination of the verb and particle, which is what many Arab learners tend to think due to the interference of the mother tongue.

Answers	No.	%
Correct answers		
1. Correct phrasal verbs	73	16.2
2. Avoidance of phrasal verbs	120	26.7
Incorrect answers		
1. Incorrect phrasal verbs	35	7.7
2. Other incorrect answers	222	49.4
Total	450	100%

Table 1: Use and avoidance of phrasal verbs (guidance provided)

Answers	No.	%
Correct answers		
1. Correct phrasal verbs	43	9.6
2. Avoidance of phrasal verbs	259	57.6
Incorrect answers		
1. Incorrect phrasal verbs	28	6.2
2. Other incorrect answers	120	26.6
Total	450	100%

Table 2: Use of avoidance of phrasal verbs (guidance not provided)

Answers	No.	%
Correct answers	185	41.1
Incorrect answers	265	58.9
Total	450	100%

Table 3: Testees' comprehension of phrasal verbs in context

Answers	No.	%
Correct answers	175	38.9
Incorrect answers	275	61.1
Total	325	100%

Table 4: Testees' ability to use phrasal verbs or give their meanings

Answers	No.	%
Correct use of phrasal verbs	476	26.4
Avoidance of phrasal verbs and incorrect answers	1324	73.6

Table 5: Summary of results

Appendix

Paper One

Complete the following sentences with the help of the meaning given in brackets:

1. In the budget, the government will ————— extra expenditure next year. (take account of)
 2. The car ————— right in the middle of the street and blocked all the traffic. (stopped functioning)
 3. This refectory ————— both staff and students. (supplies food to or for)
 4. We expect the government to ————— something to help the victims of the tragedy. (hand out financial help)
 5. In two years, they will ————— with nothing to show for their effort. (come to an end)
 6. I suppose we have to ————— again to get him what he wants. (pay)
 7. He did not know where the place was, so he asked the bus conductor to tell him where to —————. (dismount)
 8. ————— a minute and I'll come with you. (wait)
 9. They expect to ————— all the difficulties at a special gathering next month. (resolve)
 10. She was pleased to be invited to ————— the conversation. (participate)
 11. The boxer was ————— in the sixth round. (made unconscious)
 12. Those students were just ————— doing nothing in particular. (wasting time)
 13. The children were ————— in their bedroom. (doing aimless things)
 14. He is very difficult to ————— to anything. (make agree)
 15. They do not like the scheme and have decided to ————. (choose to be excluded)
 16. The boy tried to ————— enough courage to face the bully. (find)
 17. Those who want tickets for today's performance should ————— here. (stand in a line and wait)
 18. Her family will ————— her in this emergency. (come together to give help)
 19. The money which the old man left has been ————. (divided out)
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20. The workers have decided to ————— the agreement with the management. (reject)
21. Our supply of coal has been —————; we need some more. (consumed)
22. His extraordinary behaviour ————— madness. (comes close to)
23. This material is not very good; it ————— quickly. (becomes useless)
24. When he was shot, the soldier ————— in pain. (shouted loudly)
25. They ————— in their new sports car at a great speed. (drove)

Paper Two

Fill in the blanks:

1. We expect students to ————— the rules and regulations of the University.
2. He tried to ————— the fight between them but failed.
3. These scientists will ————— some interesting experiments.
4. It didn't ————— him that he was no longer wanted.
5. If he isn't careful he'll ————— penniless.
6. I can't ————— how much money I owe you.
7. You may as well ————— now if you can't continue the struggle.
8. He's such an important man that everything ————— his decisions.
9. The police are going to ————— the events leading to his death.
10. He had a puncture, so he quickly ————— the wheel and repaired it.
11. ————— the grass, please.
12. The ailing factory will ————— 200 workers.
13. This boy is very shy; he doesn't ————— very well.
14. The old lady ————— by her cosy fire.
15. We hoped she would ————— to having told the lie.
16. These ideas have always been difficult to ————— the students.
17. His pace ————— when he was told to hurry up.
18. Don't say that to him on the phone or he'll —————.
19. The government will ————— to settle the strike.
20. The committee has decided to ————— all these applications.
21. They expect to ————— a lot of paper in tomorrow's exam.
22. The people will ————— a new government tomorrow.
23. She's going to ————— all the dishes today.

24. The oxen were ————— and then attached to the plough.
 25. She's forgotten to ————— her dress.

Paper Three

Replace the underlined phrase in each of the following sentences with another word or phrase which means almost the same as the underlined phrase:

1. The children have been acting up all morning, and I'm exhausted.
2. The young lady refused to back down and accept our proposals.
3. He fainted for a few minutes, then he slowly began to come round.
4. She is all dolled up and ready to go to the party.
5. He ekes out a living somehow.
6. The college folded up quite suddenly.
7. Go over this report for me and tell me what you think.
8. The scandal was very difficult to hush up.
9. Because of his broken leg, he was invalided out at the beginning of the year.
10. His car was jammed in by two buses, and he could not get it out.
11. They expect him to knuckle under and do what he is told.
12. She never lets on that she knows him.
13. After weeks of hostility, they have decided to make up.
14. The police enquiry has narrowed down to only five people now.
15. She began to open out once she got to know us better.
16. The car pulled in at a hotel on the outskirts of the town.
17. She was very angry earlier on, but she has quietened down now.
18. You tend to rake up the past all the time.
19. They always stick up for him.
20. We have decided to team up for the project.
21. They were ushered in by an attractive and polite waitress.
22. I don't know him well, so I can't vouch for his integrity.
23. The exam helps to weed out unsatisfactory candidates.
24. The little dog yapped away at the children through the fence.
25. The children zipped out at the end of their lessons.

Paper Four

Give the meaning in English of each of the following phrases, or use it in a sentence expressing its idiomatic meaning:

- A. check in check off check on check up check out

B. get in	get off	get on	get up	get out
C. let in	let off	let on	let up	let out
D. put in	put off	put on	put up	put out
E. take in	take off	take on	take up	take out

Notes

1. The total number is calculated as follows: 4 papers X 25 items 18 testees $\pm$ 1800.
2. An investigation into the quality of English teacher training in the Arab world, and an examination of the English texts used there do not fall within the scope of this study.

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