

AVOIDANCE OF PHRASAL VERBS BY ALBANIAN EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs are considered as a difficult and problematic area of study by both teachers and students of English as a foreign language. Students' identification and understanding of phrasal verbs can be limited due to the low level of exposure to them. Nonetheless, phrasal verbs take up a large number of the English vocabulary and ensure language fluency among students. Therefore, many researchers have studied students' tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs when they can choose a one-word verb that is less complex. The complexity of phrasal verbs, especially of those with idiomatic meanings, makes it harder for students to understand them. Researchers and teachers of different nationalities have found that EFL students prefer using one-word equivalents and in most cases avoid using a phrasal verb with the same meaning.

An overview of important studies presents different factors and reasons why this phenomenon of avoidance takes place. Moreover, this paper reveals findings of a study of phrasal verbs involving Albanian high school students who are foreign language learners of English. This study aimed at identifying any avoidance of phrasal verbs among these students when they were given other options through the use of tests. Moreover, proper instruction of phrasal verbs proved to be crucial in determining students' avoidance of phrasal verbs. Consequently, the findings of the study revealed students' tendency to avoid phrasal verbs which was attributed to students' insufficient exposure and instruction on phrasal verbs, as well as the lack of these verbs in the students' first language.

Keywords: *phrasal verbs, avoidance, EFL students, L1 interference.*

1. Introduction

Phrasal verb avoidance is an important category in the study of EFL acquisition of these verbal combinations. It represents a tendency that is mostly common among non-native speakers of English. Avoidance occurs when the learner anticipates instinctively that they will have difficulties with that certain issue in question. Therefore, avoidance does not necessarily mean ignorance or that the student does not have any knowledge on the issue whatsoever. It implies that the learner views the issue as complex and not conforming to the norms previously learned in their mother tongue.

Hence, avoidance of phrasal verbs is closely linked to the inexistence of this kind of structure in the learner's first language and students' resistance to creating a bridge between the first language and the target language. This paper aims at investigating the level of avoidance that Albanian high school EFL learners show by engaging them in a practical study and categorizing them in groups in order to show a distinction between students who undergo an instruction on phrasal verbs and those who do not. Moreover, students' exposure to phrasal verbs is the most important variable. Nonetheless, this paper would not be complete without the literature review of similar research on the avoidance of phrasal verbs among EFL students of other nationalities.

2. Literature review

The avoidance of phrasal verbs by students has been identified as one of the main problems interfering with the learning process of these phrases. Chen (2007) is a researcher of phrasal verbs, whose study was done with Chinese learners of English and reported that the reason for the avoidance of phrasal verbs was 'a relatively weak understanding of the body of English vocabulary'. Furthermore, it was reported that participants in the study preferred 'one-word vocabularies' to phrasal verbs regardless of which was considered more suitable in the context given, thus, avoiding phrasal verbs altogether. "There are various factors contributing to the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners. They are related to societal factors, institutional factors, teacher and learner factors as well as ineffective curriculum documents" (Chen, 2007, p. 349).

Liao and Fukuya (2004) represent important research when discussing avoidance of phrasal verbs, by similarly including Chinese learners of English as a foreign language. What distinguishes this study from the previous one is that they include a number of native speakers of English, which gives the researcher an opportunity to compare the results. Hence, according to the findings, one of the factors that affected learner's avoidance of phrasal verbs was their proficiency level, which means that the avoidance was detected to a higher level among non-native speakers. Moreover, it is noted by the authors that this is due to first language transfer, which undoubtedly influences students' proficiency levels (Liao and Fukuya, 2004).

An earlier study on avoidance of phrasal verbs was done by Dagut and Laufer (1985), who included a group of most frequently used or preferred phrasal verbs by Hebrew learners of English. The results showed that students chose 'single-word verbs over phrasal verbs', despite the fact that not all phrasal verbs given had figurative meaning. The researchers concluded that the avoidance of phrasal verbs occurred due to structural differences. Laufer and Eliason (1993) conducted the same study with Swedish learners of English, hence, linking the phrasal verb avoidance to students' proficiency level.

Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) research was based on a questionnaire which would measure students' tendency to choose a one-word verb as opposed to 'a multi-word verb'. The study made a comparison between native speakers and advanced non-native speakers of English, resulting in phrasal verb avoidance by non-native speakers. Furthermore, the authors also concluded that the non-native students were not affected by the extent to which they were being exposed to native-speaking surroundings, by adding that the frequency of use of one-word verbs proved to be higher than the use of phrasal verbs (Siyanova and Schmitt, 2007).

Spanish students have also been investigated on the use of phrasal verbs as learners of English as a second language by Gaston (2004). The author claims that Spanish students tend to avoid phrasal verbs primarily because the phrasal verb structure is not common in languages not belonging to the Germanic branch. According to the findings of this study, the low proficiency level in English is the main culprit for avoidance or ignorance of phrasal verbs. Furthermore, the multiple meanings of each phrasal verb are mentioned as an important reason for students choosing a one-word verb instead of a phrasal verb (Gaston, 2004).

Another avoidance study was done by Abdul Rahman and Abid (2014), who studied a group of Omani students. This study is important because its participants included students who would become English teachers and would, at some point, face the problem of phrasal verb avoidance among students. Moreover, the findings showed that phrasal verbs were not part of these students' written discourse either, by confirming a clear avoidance where students preferred using one-word equivalents in addition to phrasal verbs. Based on this, a textbook analysis of all coursebooks that these students had been exposed to since the beginning of their instruction in English showed a complete lack of phrasal verb inclusion whatsoever. Hence, this poses the question: How would these future teachers of English teach phrasal verbs, if they had never even heard of them? The authors' most relevant suggestion in this regard is that the syllabi need to change in order to include verbs that take up 'about one third of the English verb vocabulary' (Abdul Rahman and Abid, 2014).

A study on the frequency of use of phrasal verbs in English by students of different nationalities in comparison to native speakers of English shows interesting findings, especially because a diversity of nationalities participated in it, including Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish (Riguel, 2014). According to findings, the groups of students who used phrasal verbs less frequently than native speakers were Bulgarian, Czech, Finnish, Russian and Swedish students. Moreover, Dutch and Polish students, reported the same results as native speakers. Among groups of students who mostly avoided the usage of phrasal verbs were Spanish, Italian, and French, which is reported to be as a result of the absence of phrasal verbs in these languages. Furthermore, it was the German group of students who were distinguished from all the other groups, by showing an even higher percentage of use than native speakers of English, which according to the author could be understandable as there are phrasal verbs in the German language, and they are familiar with this type of verb combinations (Riguel, 2014).

Avoidance of phrasal verbs was also investigated among Thai students learning English as a foreign language. The results of this study detected the usual factors including the polysemous characteristic that phrasal verbs have with a higher focus on the interference of the mother tongue, especially when it represents totally different features than English on many aspects. The findings were in concordance with the authors' hypothesis, that students ended up avoiding the use of phrasal verbs and preferred the choice of a one-word equivalent. One of the main reasons for this avoidance was based on the non-existent structure of phrasal verbs in Thai language. The authors also elaborate on the Thai teachers' attitude towards phrasal verbs who consider them as non-important structures that belong to colloquial language hence do not give them importance in the EFL classroom, which directly influences to the students' readiness and ability to acquire phrasal verbs. (Kosolsombat and Pongpaibroj, 2018).

3. Phrasal verb equivalents in Albanian

When it comes to Albanian language, being part of Indo-European family, it does not include the same constructions as phrasal verbs, thus, it cannot produce the same equivalents in the attempt to offer the closest meaning to these phraseological constructions. Phraseology in Albanian Language was considered a separate scientific discipline almost by the end of the twentieth century by the famous Albanian scholar Thomai (1981), who also used the term phraseological units (*njësi frazeologjike*). In his article "Issues of Albanian Phraseology", Thomai (1981) posed the need for understanding all sides of a phraseological unit including: grammatical category, content, and form, among others, in order to use the phraseological unit correctly. He defined a phraseological unit as a unit with its own meaning, consisting of two or more words 'which have the value of a single word and are irreplaceable to language' (Thomai, 1981, p. 269).

Considering that phrasal verbs are a category among these phraseological units, the closest and most appropriate equivalent term for phrasal verbs in Albanian is ‘shprehje foljore’, which is also the literal meaning, as well as ‘njësi frazeologjike foljore’, which can be literally translated as a ‘verbal phraseological unit’, which is a broader term and includes different other categories, to which phrasal verbs can be considered as part of (Thomai, 1981).

Vora (2012), in her dissertation about the comparison of phraseological units from English to Albanian, builds up on Thomai’s (1981) representation of phraseological units and classifies the English equivalent of phrasal verbs as phraseological units have only one ‘dominant element’. This means that the verb is the main carrier of the meaning, with the adverbial or prepositional particle as an added element which makes it possible for it to be considered a phraseological unit. “In these units, consisting of a verb and an adverbial particle, the meaning of which is equivalent to one verb, the semantic and grammatical features are focused on the first element of the unit” (Vora, 2012, p. 18).

4. Methodology of the study

The practical part of this paper carries the most important part of the weight of the research. Nevertheless, the carefully done and detailed literature review contributed to a great extent to giving insights into a more in-depth exploration of the gathered data from the classroom research. This study was based on the following two hypotheses:

- Avoidance of using phrasal verbs in context is common among Albanian high school EFL students.
- Students’ avoidance of phrasal verbs derives from the lack of instruction and exposure to them.

Considering that phrasal verbs are both part of grammar and vocabulary, gathering qualitative data seemed more than important in order to start building the foundation of the research. In order to test the hypothesis a pre-test and a post-test were used as instruments, which were performed prior to the beginning of the experiment and after it was finished, respectively.

Students who took part in this study were third-year high school who come from the same ethnic background, which is Albanian, therefore, they follow their high-school studies in an Albanian public high school where they attend classes at an intermediate or B1+ level of English. The total number of participants was 120, half of which were part of the controlled group and the other half was part of the experimental group. On the one hand, students from the controlled group only needed to take the pre-test and post-test without any instruction or training in between the tests. On the other hand, the experimental group had to undergo a two-month instruction on phrasal verbs which started after the pre-test and ended before students took the post-test. The time length of the instruction on phrasal verbs as an important part of this research was two months, including one class per week. This instruction was followed by the participants of the experimental group only. The instruction was planned beforehand with the preparation of lesson plans that had to be followed.

The pre-test consisted of a multiple-choice exercise. The phrasal verbs were part of the multiple choices that were given for each five sentences, along with the two single-word equivalents for each phrasal verb respectively. The blank in each sentence was supposed to be filled in with either a phrasal verb or one of the two single-word equivalents. The only difference of the same exercise in the post-test version was incorporating two phrasal verbs and one single-word equivalent in the options and finding out whether this had a different impact on students’ choices. The aim of these tests was to examine the hypotheses and determine through the gathered data whether students will avoid using a phrasal verb and choose its single-word equivalent which is a more familiar word. Changes in this tendency were also compared from the pre-test to the post-test version.

Phrasal verbs with one-word equivalents were chosen for this exercise, which needed to have two options of one-word equivalent in the pre-test and only one in the post-test. Moreover, reliability and validity of these tests depended on the phrasal verbs that were chosen, i.e., the one-word equivalent needed to be the best replaceable option for the chosen phrasal verb by posing as a distractor so that avoidance could be tracked.

5. Findings

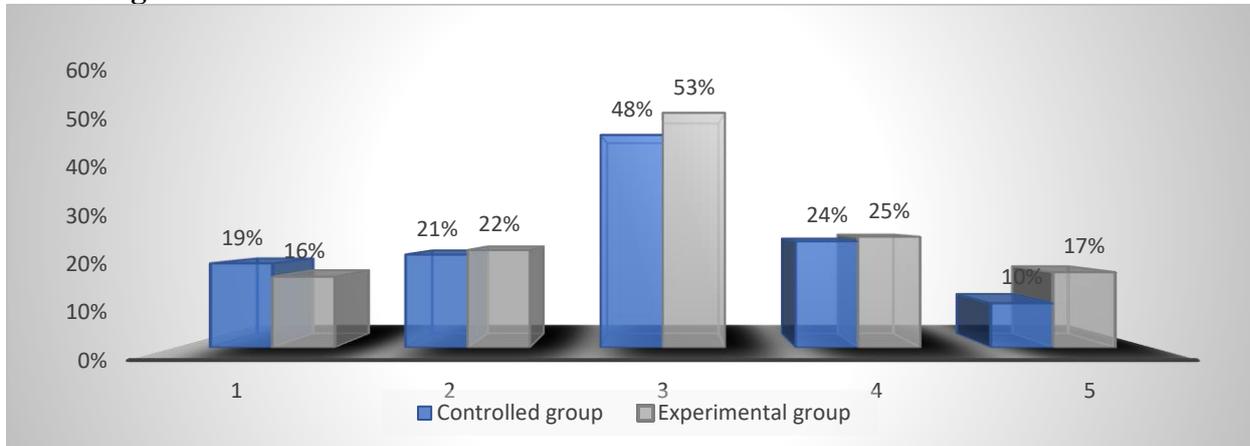


Figure 1. Comparison of pre-test results

The first figure represents the comparison of correct responses among groups for the pre-test results. As is illustrated in the figure, students from both groups showed a high percentage of avoidance of phrasal verbs, with only slight differences from one group to the other, which proves the first hypothesis, that students have a general tendency of avoiding phrasal verbs. The low percentages given in the figure show the number of times that students decided to use a phrasal verb instead of a one-word equivalent with the same meaning. Only with the phrasal verb ‘deal with’ were they able to show significantly higher results reaching up to 53%, as opposed to the lowest results with the verb ‘come across’ with as low as 10%. However, this comparison showed that the controlled group indicated only a slight difference from the experimental group in phrasal verb avoidance. Moreover, students’ avoidance of phrasal verbs can also be explained judging from the types of verbs that have been given as one-word equivalents. Students mostly avoided using a phrasal verb in the cases where the single-word equivalents included more commonly used verbs such as: cancel, wear and find, whereas they did not avoid the verb ‘deal with’ because the verb ‘deal’ was more familiar to them than the verb ‘solve’ or ‘resolve’.

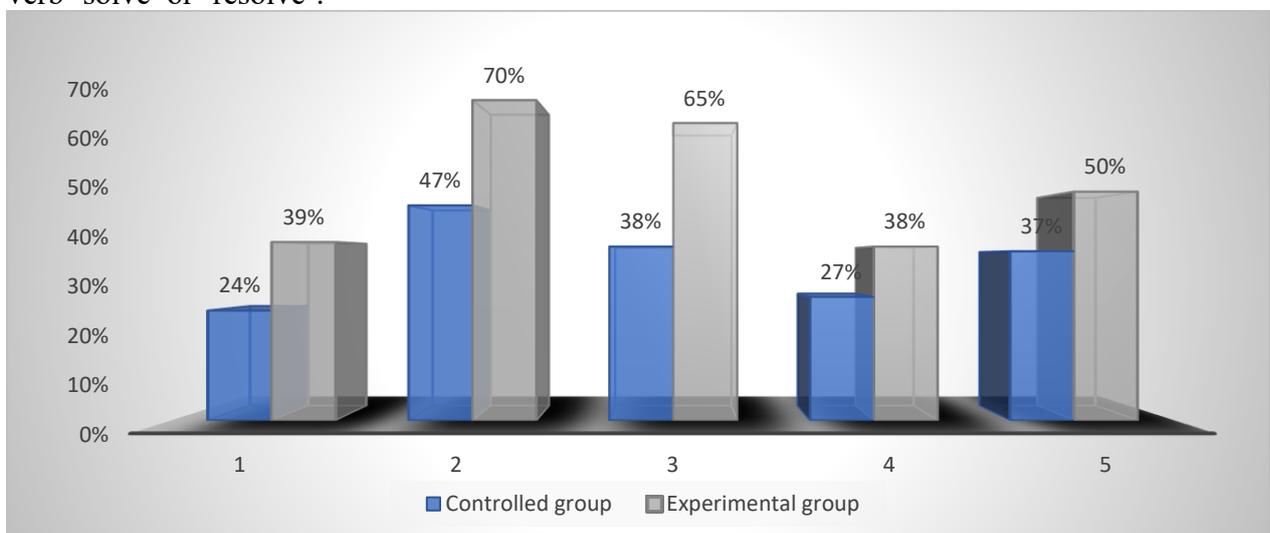


Figure 2. Comparison of post-test results

The second figure demonstrates comparison of results between both groups in the post-test. These findings confirm the second hypothesis that students avoid using phrasal verbs if they had not been properly exposed to them. Students from the experimental group demonstrated a higher percentage of usage of phrasal verbs, whereas controlled group, which hadn't previously undergone a phrasal verb instruction, showed a higher percentage of usage of the one-word equivalents. The distinction between the groups reaches as high as 30% with the experimental group reaching the highest percentage of using phrasal verbs (70%). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the lowest results shown by the controlled group do not go below 24%, which indicates that even students from the group that did not attend the phrasal verb instruction had shown a sort of improvement no matter how slight it presented to be. Therefore, these findings show that students had become aware of the importance of phrasal verbs because of their inclusion through the planned instruction, which proves the above-mentioned hypothesis even more.

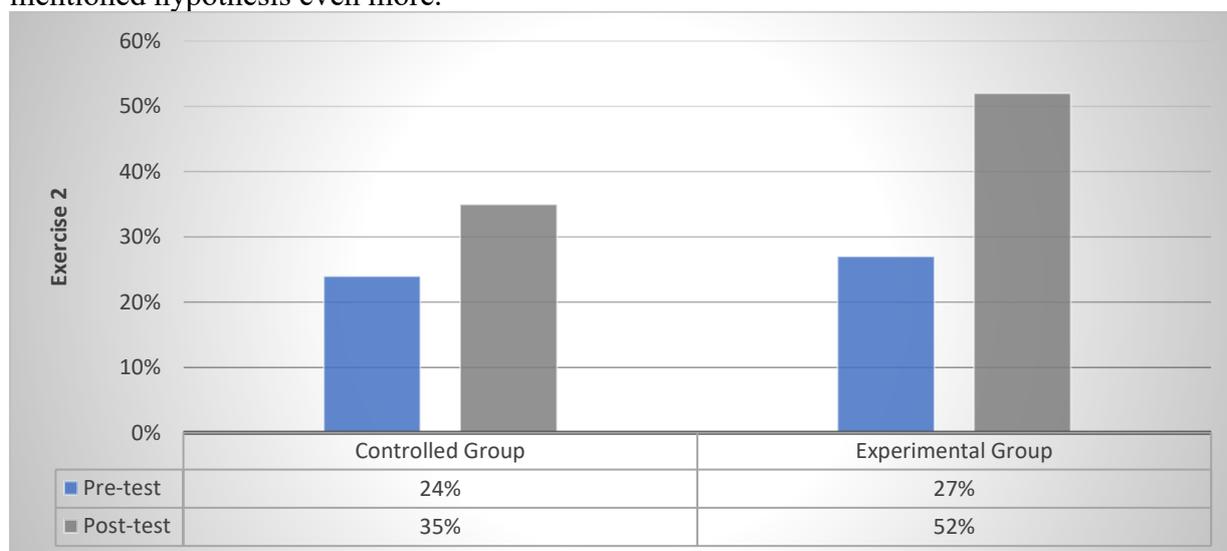


Figure 3. Average percentage of correct pre- test and post-test answers among groups

The third figure displays the comparison of both the controlled group and experimental group from the pre-test to the post-test. According to this comparison, it is obvious that students from the controlled group demonstrated a lower usage of phrasal verbs with the average of correct results changing for only 11% from the pre-test to the post-test, by automatically showing a higher avoidance of phrasal verbs. Nevertheless, students from the experimental group showed a rise in the average percentage of correct answers by 25% among tests, by indicating a much lower avoidance than the controlled group. Taking into consideration that in the post-test version one more phrasal verb was added for students to choose, in order to slightly increase the level of difficulty of the exercise, students from the experimental group still ended up showing great results as a result of their exposure to phrasal verbs through the period of the two-month instruction. Blending the phrasal verb instruction into the syllabus would improve all of the students' overall understanding of phrasal verbs even more so because they do not exist in the students' first language.

6. Interpretation of findings

The prediction about Albanian EFL students' tendency of avoiding phrasal verbs was not overruled by the reported results of this research. In fact, the data collection reports the confirmation of both hypotheses related to phrasal verb avoidance, by confirming that this avoidance is a common phenomenon among Albanian EFL students.

Furthermore, when compared to the research elaborated in the literature review, Albanian EFL students have shown similar to identical results, due to the lack of phrasal verbs in the students' mother tongue, as suggested and reported by the above-mentioned authors. The first language transfer has played a significant role in the students' tendency to include phrasal verbs. (Chen, 2007; Liao and Fukuya, 2004; Siyanova and Schmitt, 2007; Riguel, 2014).

The results gathered from the pre-test version reported a significant amount of avoidance by both the controlled group and the experimental group, almost equally. Three out of five cases showed avoidance of the phrasal verb by more than 80%, which is substantial in comparison to the percentage of students who chose the phrasal verb as an option. The other two cases showed an avoidance of less than 75% reaching down to 50% for one of them. Therefore, half of the students that had participated in the research, from both groups equally, had chosen the phrasal verb in only one of the given contexts.

One way of elaborating the reason why it was easier for students to choose a certain phrasal verb and decide not to choose others, was connected to the types of phrasal verbs and the one-word equivalent that were given. Moreover, the phrasal verb that half of the students decided not to avoid was 'deal with', which appeared as a more correct option to students in comparison to the one-word equivalents 'solve' and 'resolve', which entail an almost identical meaning to one another. According to these results, students showed more familiarity to the meaning of the verb 'deal' rather than the meaning of the verb 'solve'. At this point, the role of the particle must have not been accounted for, as it does not change the meaning of the phrasal verbs but only adds to it. Therefore, it is hard to distinguish whether students consciously chose it as a phrasal verb 'deal with' or just another one-word equivalent 'deal'.

An analysis of the choices that students had in the other sentences, can lead to the same conclusion, that students had chosen a verb they had been more exposed to and have been more familiar with throughout their own process of learning English as a foreign language. The best example to demonstrate this is the students' tendency to choose the verb 'cancel' over the phrasal verb 'call off', which contains idiomatic meaning, and the verb 'call' does not resemble the meaning of the verb 'cancel' without combining with the particle 'off'. The same scenario happened when students had to choose among the verb 'found' and the phrasal verb with idiomatic meaning 'come across', which implies a totally different meaning when omitting the particle 'across'.

Nevertheless, there was a case when students avoided using the phrasal verb even when it did not contain an idiomatic meaning. The phrasal verb 'put on' does not entirely contain a literal meaning, however, the meaning of the verb 'put' can be more easily associated with the verb 'wear' even if you have to add the particle 'on' in order to complete the meaning. Moreover, even if the verb 'put' does not have a completely different meaning as the other verbs, it was still not chosen by the majority of students, which resulted in students' avoidance of the phrasal verb by both groups similarly.

The phrasal verb 'work out' was also avoided by the majority of students from both groups equally because they collocated the verb 'find' with the word 'solution', especially since the verb 'find' is a commonly used verb even among beginner levels of language instruction. The phrasal verb 'work out' does not only contain idiomatic meaning, but it is also polysemous. Therefore, most of the students have associated the phrasal verb 'work out' with the gym, without being aware of the other meaning it entails, which is 'find'. At this point, it can be concluded that this phrasal verb had been ruled out by the students because they had taken its meaning as completely the opposite.

Nonetheless, students' avoidance of phrasal verbs changed considerably in the post-test, after the experimental group had finished the phrasal verb instruction. Students were more exposed to choosing a phrasal verb in the post-test because they were offered two phrasal verbs instead of one, which makes the avoidance even more significant.

The majority of students from the experimental group had grown more conscious to using phrasal verbs by choosing 'keep up' which entails idiomatic meaning and requires understanding of the verb not only based on the context. The controlled group had chosen 'the safer' more familiar version 'continue', which perfectly fits into the meaning of the given sentence and does not allow for students to question the correctness of any other verbs, especially if they had not been exposed to phrasal verbs, in which case they consider them as complicated. The other case with the highest difference between groups showed that the percentage of students from the controlled group who had avoided the correct phrasal verb 'turn out' had chosen the other optional phrasal verb 'got out'. Consequently, this cannot be taken as avoidance by the controlled group, but rather as lack of understanding of the meaning of the phrasal verb. If analyzed inside the controlled group, the percentage of students who had chosen the one-word equivalent was very low, which makes this the only case where the controlled group had shown such a low level of avoidance of phrasal verbs.

The difference between groups in the other three contexts was slightly lower, with the experimental group demonstrating an avoidance lower by 10% in comparison to the controlled group. The highest avoidance was reported when students were supposed to choose the phrasal verb 'put out' which resembles an idiomatic meaning and the majority of students from both groups were not able to collocate it to 'the process of extinguishing fire'. Instead, the majority of students opted for the more recognizable version, the one-word equivalent 'stop', which belongs to the group of the most commonly used verbs. A similar situation occurred with the phrasal verb 'take on' which was also difficult to connect to the meaning of 'starting an activity' by the majority of students from both groups. Hence, most of the students had chosen the verb 'do' by not examining any further why two phrasal verbs were given as option, and they were choosing the one-word equivalent.

There was one case that demonstrated lower avoidance by students from both groups, where half of the students from the experimental group and 10% less from the controlled group had chosen the correct option. The phrasal verb 'set up', even though with idiomatic meaning, had proven to be more understandable and not many students had avoided its use, even though a considerable number of students had chosen the one-word equivalent 'arrange' which does not really belong to the most commonly used words. Nevertheless, the percentage of students from the experimental group who had chosen the phrasal verb was higher than those who had chosen the one-word equivalent, as opposed to the controlled group, who demonstrated an even percentage for both options.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, after a thorough analysis of the reported findings from the pre-test and the post-test, the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Albanian EFL students is undeniable with results reaching up to as high as 90%. Many factors can be taken as responsible for this occurrence, including the students' lack or insufficient instruction on phrasal verbs, which was proven to be the most important factor as demonstrated by the findings of this practical experiment. Moreover, the fact that students are not properly exposed to phrasal verbs makes them less aware of their structure or significance that they hold in the natives' everyday speech.

The findings also confirm the students' necessity of being exposed to phrasal verbs in an organized manner in order not to avoid their usage whenever other more familiar options are presented to them. Furthermore, students' skepticism in choosing to use a phrasal verb is related to their insufficient practice of using the same verbs in meaningful context in their EFL classrooms, hence their tendency of choosing the safer version by avoiding the usage of phrasal verbs. Nonetheless, the impact of the students' mother tongue is vast when it comes to both learning and teaching phrasal verbs and it is indisputably a major factor when it comes to students' avoidance of using phrasal verbs.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that phrasal verbs take up a great number of the English vocabulary and influence language fluency. Therefore, recognizing students' avoidance of phrasal verbs as a problem is the first step to doing something about their inclusion in EFL classrooms. The recommendation of giving phrasal verbs a proper treatment and inclusion is directed to all EFL teachers by raising their awareness of the importance of phrasal verbs and influencing their attitude towards the inclusion of phrasal verbs.

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