

COMMON STUDENT'S ERRORS WITH PHRASAL VERBS – A CASE STUDY WITH UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TETOVA

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs represent and have always represented an aspect of the English grammar that is considered 'difficult' in language acquisition and 'problematic' in a spoken use by non-native learners of English. One of the reasons that phrasal verbs appear to be challenging to non-native speakers is that there are so many definitions and categories discussed by many authors and it creates confusion among them. Another reason is that this linguistic category has a great deal of polysemy as well as idiomaticity, which further complicates their analysis at syntactical and semantical level. For the purposes of our research, we will analyze phrasal verbs that are traditionally classified in English grammars as such.

This research is a qualitative research that is realized among undergraduate students of English department that study English as a foreign language at different academic years at University of Tetova. Qualitative research data were collected through an essay that was given to 54 students, with a recommendation to use phrasal verbs in greater numbers. The collected data contain number of participants, most common phrasal verbs, frequency of the verb use in essays with a focus on common students' errors in the use of phrasal verbs. Data analysis shows that certain phrasal verbs are used more often than others and that certain phrasal verbs are used incorrectly by all students.

Keywords: *phrasal verbs, common errors, undergraduate students, English acquisition.*

Introduction

As mentioned by Šučur (2019), the term 'word' is often used not only for a specific type of word according to morphology, but also for more complex forms that lexically or syntactically act as a single word. These forms are called multiword language items or units. Multiword vocabulary units are frequently a set of words which, when combined take on surprising meanings. Some examples of these multi-word linguistic units include parts that are used in certain combinations such as phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions, and collocations. Multi-word combinations, including multi-word verbs, have always been a challenge both for teachers in class and for students learning English.

As stated by Gardner and Davies (2007), teachers place great importance to the knowledge of multi-word combinations on language learners, in order for them to develop speaking ability and achieve native-like fluency. Further, it is not always easy to precisely define and classify each phrase and it is pointed by Haugh and Takeuchi (2023) that there is also a lot of overlap between these linguistic units. However, many researchers such as Garner

and Schmitt (2015), have shown that these linguistic items are very present in everyday English, which indicates how important they are when learning a language.

According to Brown et al. (2022), lately more attention has been paid to vocabulary and its acquisition because it represents a substantial aspect when learning a language. This idea has been supported by many researchers. Starting from Crowley et al. (2023), who focuses on idioms, Boers (2021), concentrates on formulaic parts of the language and Takeuchi (2023), emphasizes on phrasal verbs. The great importance of acquiring multi-lingual vocabulary is also highlighted by Wolter (2020), who proved that the acquisition of multi-lingual vocabulary significantly increases the speaking fluency of EFL students, while Crowley et al. (2023), in his research came to the conclusion that knowledge of multi-word items increases the understanding and use of the idiomatic.

Phrasal verbs (PVs)

English phrasal verbs (PVs henceforth) are a combination of several words or differently, they are multi-word phrases, consisting of a verb and an adverbial particle. Quirk et al. (1985:1150), define them as ‘a unit which behaves to some extent either lexically or syntactically as a single verb’. Next, as explained by Gairns & Redman (2011), English PVs are most often combinations of two words, but they can also be combinations of three words, one of which is the main verb and the other is the particle. Additionally, the particle can be an adverb or preposition.

Moreover, Shovak & Petiy (2021), claim that PVs are very common linguistic units in English, structures consisting of a main verb with a preposition (at, off); a main verb with an adverbial (away, into, out), or a main verb with both (put up with). Each of these parts is important for the sentence and forms a semantic wholeness. Hlavatska (2021:36), claims the same by stating that PV is “a combination of a verb with a preposition or an adverb, or simultaneously with both” which appearing as one linguistic unit creates the overall logical meaning of the sentence.

Considering the definitions and explanations above, as well as other analysis of phrasal verbs done by other linguists, make us realize the difficulty of understanding how a specific verb attaches to a specific particle and as such produce meaning even though the connection between these two units is not clear and logical. In other words, it seems as the meaning of the main verb and the particle are unrelated or have no connection to the meaning it transmits and this complexity adds interest to these linguistic constructions.

Transitivity and Intransitivity of PVs

As it follows, we will focus on the syntactic aspect of these constructions and elaborate on it in more detail. Indeed, when it comes to this aspect, a PV can be divided into two main groups, as is often mentioned in grammars and dictionaries, meaning that there is a difference between “transitive” and “intransitive” PVs. It is practical and more understandable to rely on the definition given by **The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar (2014)**, where “transitive” verbs are defined as verbs that employ direct objects and “intransitive” verbs are defined as verbs that don’t employ direct objects. However, the issue is a little more complex, since it is not easy to determine the transitivity of a verb.

The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar (2014), explains that a verb can be both, indicating that determining the transitivity of a verb is challenging. According to Fournier (2017:5), “transitivity or intransitivity is partially linked to the status of the second element”. Based on this, we can say that English PVs are divided into transitive and intransitive PVs. Transitive PVs require objects in sentences such as: She *filled out* this job application. Intransitive PVs don't require objects in sentences: She *hung up*.

Furthermore, Foley & Hall (2005), explain that transitive PVs can be separable PVs: *take off* her shoes – *take* her shoes *off* (order of verb + prep/adverb can change), and non – separable PVs: they were *looking for* Freddy (order of verb + prep/adverb remains fixed). According to them transitive PVs may be optionally separable: he had to *give up* his phone – he had to *give* his phone *up*, and permanently separable as described in McCarthy & O'Dell (2017) with the obligation of object placed between the particle and the verb such as; *get* her *down*, *ask* her out (verb – object – particle).

Teaching PVs

A number of studies indicate that multi-word verbs have always been a challenge for learners and teachers and as a result, their incorporation in the teaching process was important (Takeuchi, 2023; Takeda, 2024). Considering this, various ways of approaching, explaining and teaching PVs more thoroughly to students of the English language began to be required. Birdsell & Kavanagh (2023), used internet appliances for teaching PVs and the translation method with corresponding pictures, as well as their presentation with collocations. All three methods were confirmed to be effective, and the outcomes revealed that students progressed on average in their knowledge of PVs through these teaching interventions.

Strong & Leeming (2024) suggest that the practice of filling the gap (errors and trials as well as rewriting) is beneficial and they use an online appliance to examine the effectiveness of the application of these exercises, while Spring & Takeda (2024) showed that the use of online multi-modal cards improves the learning of a multi-word lexicon and enhances the process of learning and teaching PVs. Binh (2024) & Umarova (2024) suggest some activities for teaching English PVs like, step by step introduction, good explanation, their categorization, chunking, teaching with context, by breaking them into constituent parts and their meaning, emphasizing their inseparability / separability, filling the gap exercises and other similar activities such as: expansion of vocabulary, stimulation of use through authentic material, evaluation of what has already been learned with feedback, visual support, and resources such as PVs printed and online dictionaries.

Previous studies

There are many studies showing that learners that learn English as a foreign language often deal with learning obstacles when acquiring PVs because they are unaware of how these verbs combine with particles in order to produce new denotations. Further, PVs are gaining significance in the field of teaching and learning methodology because of their widespread and ambiguous nature. Barekat, B. and Baniasady, B. (2014) through their research with Iranian students, concluded that acquisition of phrasal verbs presents a difficult task for foreign students and as a result, this can provoke avoidance of their use or encourage the students to choose simpler synonyms.

Concretely, this avoidance is due to different grammatical structures or semantics of L1 and L2. El-Dakhs (2016), conducted a study with Arabic students and their knowledge of PVs was measured in two aspects: receptive and productive. The data showed a quite good comprehension - receptive ability, but not very good production - productive ability of PVs.

The reasons for such results are related to differences between languages and lack of language exposure. Haider et al. (2020) obtained similar findings with Jordanian English language learners, while Sonbul et al. (2020) showed that visual stimulation of learning PVs leads to better results in English language proficiency. Kırkgöz, Y. (2010) studied errors in writing made by beginner Turkish students. Through the study, she found out that students made mistakes while translating English PVs especially, by translating them literary. Next, Dini (2020), for her master thesis studied common students' error of PVs and the results showed

unfamiliarity, indistinguishable verb particles from nouns, i.e., the substitution of nouns for particles, mixing of verb and particle positions, and unawareness about separability / inseparability of PVs.

Moreover, Qasim (2019) in his study with students learning English as a foreign language, concluded that students do not recognize the difference between prepositions and PVs, nor do they know which are the correct particles. Finally, Qarani (2023) determined that most of the second-year English language students have difficulties in understanding and translating PVs. Especially, these students faced challenges with separability/inseparability and transitivity/intransitivity of PVs.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study on common errors with PVs among undergraduate students of the English department at the University of Tetova. Specifically, it focuses on students' use of PVs and common errors with PVs done in a written form. In order to find out the students' common errors with PVs and simultaneously, to determine which PVs are more often used, the students were given a written essay entitled "Where do I see myself in 10 years", with the instruction to use as many PVs as possible. The purpose of this research is to answer the following questions:

RQ 1. Which phrasal verbs are most often used by undergraduate students of English language?

RQ 2. Which are the common phrasal verbs errors made by undergraduate students of English language?

RQ 3. Which phrasal verbs are most often mistaken?

Data collection was carried out using an essay titled "Where do I see myself in 10 years" which was conducted on a sample of a total N= 54 students of English as a foreign language. The students are aged 18 to 23, of which 11 were first-year students, 18 were second-year students, 15 were third-year students and 10 were fourth-year students, all undergraduate students of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philology at University of Tetova. Participants were exposed to PVs in accordance with the English lectures in English language faculties, as projected in the curriculum of the Ministry of Education. Participants had different academic knowledge and achievements, as a result of being in different academic years of study. The students' essay task was of a written type with the requirement of using a large number of PVs and a length of 4200 to 5000 words for which, they had 60 minutes at their disposal. The analysis of the collected data will be carried out for each question individually, and for each academic year individually. The results will be presented with tables or charts.

Research Findings and Discussion

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, by using descriptive and statistical methods with results expressed in both numbers and percentages, in order to establish the PVs frequency of use and to determine common student errors regarding the use of English PVs. In the following pages there are tables and graphs with the results followed by comments.

Table 1. Total numb. of participants, essays, words, average numb. of words and PVs per essay

Total numb. of participants	Total numb. of essays	Total numb. of words	Total numb. of PVs	Average. numb. of words per essay	Average numb. of PVs per essay
54	54	243000 words	6912	4500	128 or 2.84%

Table number 1 reveals data on the number of participants – 54, the number of essays written – 54, the total number of words - 243000, the total number of PVs – 6912, the average number of words per essay – 4500, and the average number of PVs per essay – 128 or 2.84% of average number of words per essay.

Table 2. The most frequently used PVs in students' essays

Total number of PVs N = 6912 or 100%		
Total number of the most frequently used PVs N = 3017 or 43.65%		
<i>break down</i>	128	4.24%
<i>carry on</i>	113	3.75%
<i>come back</i>	142	4.71%
<i>count on</i>	133	4.41%
<i>do without</i>	131	4.34%
<i>end up</i>	132	4.38%
<i>find out</i>	152	5.04%
<i>fall apart</i>	136	4.51%
<i>get away</i>	89	2.95%
<i>give in</i>	92	3.05%
<i>give up</i>	157	5.20%
<i>go on</i>	123	4.08%
<i>grow up</i>	149	4.94%
<i>keep on</i>	133	4.41%
<i>keep up</i>	91	3.02%
<i>let down</i>	151	5.00%
<i>look after</i>	86	2.85%
<i>look for</i>	152	5.04%
<i>look forward to</i>	117	3.88%
<i>move on</i>	120	3.98%
<i>point out</i>	83	2.75%
<i>put up with</i>	102	3.38%
<i>run away</i>	97	3.22%
<i>stick to</i>	119	3.94%
<i>try out</i>	89	2.95%

Table number 2 reveals which are the most frequent PVs in the essays, and the data is presented in numbers and percentages.

Table 3. Total number of PVs errors in students' essay

Total number of PVs errors N = 1713 of 6912 or 24.78%		
<i>Syntactic errors</i>	542	31.64%
<i>Semantic errors</i>	517	30.18%
<i>Idiosyncratic errors</i>	654	38.18%

Table number 3 detects the type of most common errors of students use of PVs and are divided into three groups: of syntactic 542 – 31.64%, semantic 517 – 30.18% and idiosyncratic type 654 – 38.18%.

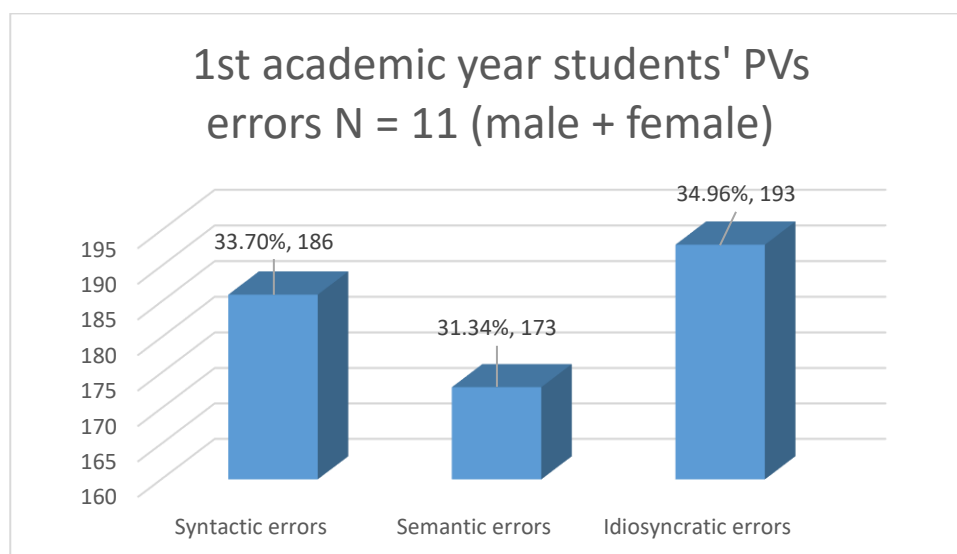


Chart 1. 1st academic year students' PVs errors N = 11 (male + female)

Chart 1 presents 1st academic year students' PVs errors by type and number of errors or how many times the 11 participants incorrectly used PVs. From the first chart, it is obvious that PVs were incorrectly used syntactically 186 - 33.70%, semantically 173 - 31.34% and idiosyncratically 193 - 34.96%.

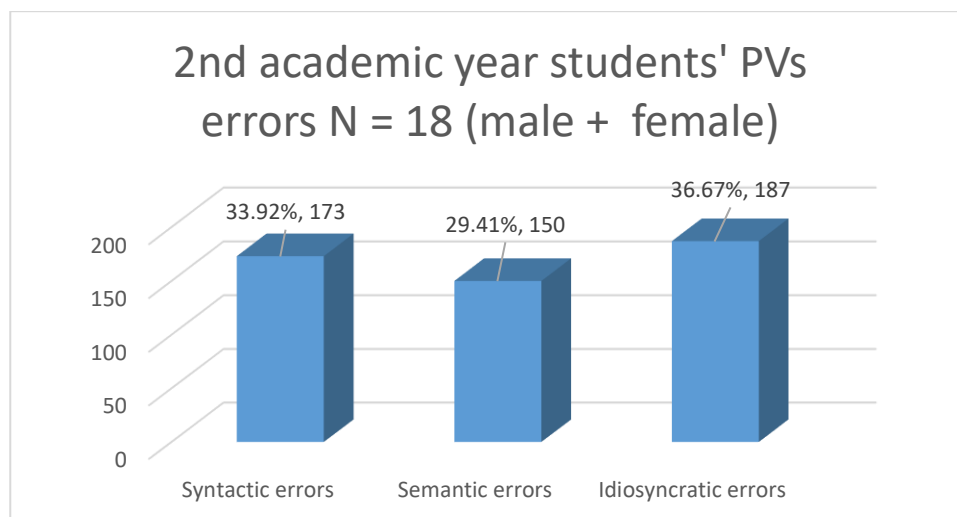


Chart 2. 2nd academic year students' PVs errors N = 18 (male + female)

Chart 2 presents 2nd academic year students' PVs errors by type and number of errors or how many times the 18 participants incorrectly used PVs. It is noticeable that PVs were incorrectly used syntactically 173 - 33.92%, semantically 150 – 29.41% and idiosyncratically 187 – 36.67%.

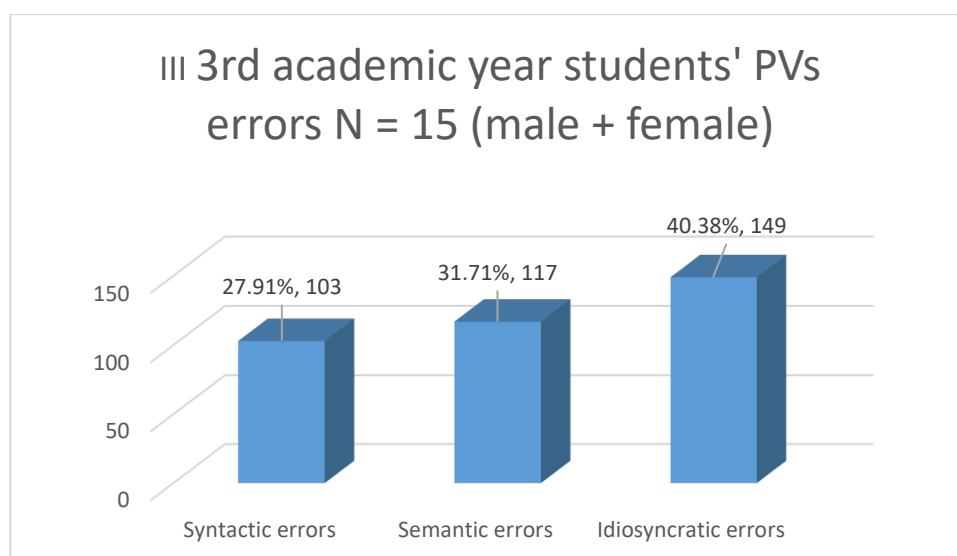


Chart 3. 3rd academic year students' PVs errors N = 15 (male + female)

Chart 3 presents 3rd academic year students' PVs errors by type and number of errors or how many times the 15 participants incorrectly used PVs, where we can see that PVs were incorrectly used syntactically 103 – 27.91%, semantically 117 – 31.71% and idiosyncratically 149 – 40.38%.

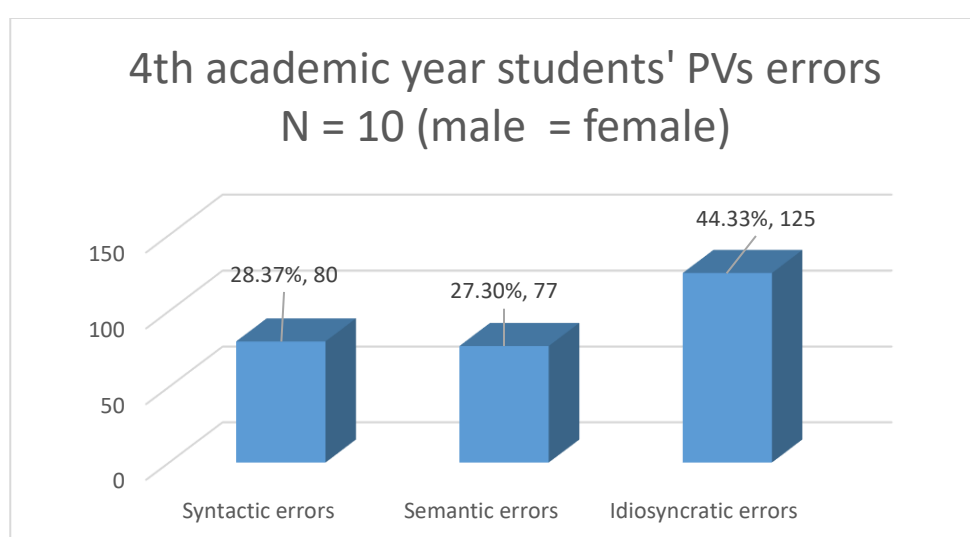


Chart 4. 4th academic year students' PVs errors N = 10 (male + female)

Chart 4 presents 4th academic year students' PVs errors N = 108 by type and number of errors or how many times the 10 participants incorrectly used PVs. It is evident that PVs were incorrectly used syntactically 80 – 28.37%, semantically 77 – 27.30% and idiosyncratically 125 – 44.33%.

Discussion

The first table reveals that the number of participants matches the number of essays, which means that all participants actively participated in the research. The number of words per essay was a satisfying 4500 and the average number of PVs per essay was also a satisfying 128. The second table reveals which PVs were the most frequent and we selected 25 PVs that were

most frequently used by students, regardless of whether they were used correctly or incorrectly, and the results are presented in numbers and percentages. The third table detects the type of most common errors of students' use of PVs and are divided into three groups: of syntactic 542 – 31.64%, semantic 517 – 30.18% and idiosyncratic type 654 – 38.18%.

In terms of syntactic errors which were a total of 542 - 31.64%, we will distinguish errors of incorrect placement of pronouns, for example *look after them* - *look them after*, *check them up* - *check up them*; sentence construction of the type - I'll try to **come** back to EU instead of I'll try to go back to EU (incorrect use of verb); improper use of particles - *find in* instead of *find out*, *give in* instead of *give up*, and omission of adverb – *put with* instead of *put up with*, *come with* instead of *come up with*, etc. However, the problem of separability/inseparability of PVs prevailed, where the participants separated inseparable PVs and showed lack of knowledge on the transitivity and intransitivity of verbs.

As far as semantic errors are concerned, which were a total of 517 - 30.18%, we will mention an example where an idiom is used instead of a PV such as: *turn the page* instead of *move on*. Another error deals with a use of other word groups instead of a PV such as: *continue on* instead of *carry on*, *arrive up* instead of *end up*, *fail on* instead of *let down*, *caring on* instead of *look after*, etc. The final semantic error deals with the use of adverb or preposition in the wrong way, and thus changing the meaning of the following PVs, for example: *go about* - *go after*, *get over* - *get through*, *take over* - *take up*, *give up* - *give away*, *look after* - *look for*, *point to* - *point up*, *look up* - *look of*, etc.

As for idiosyncratic errors which were a total of 654 - 38.13% and appeared in the largest number, we will mention the doctoral thesis of Koça (2015:190), which in relation to PVs points out that “in Albanian we don't have them as such” and it is easy to understand why students' confusion with prepositions and incorrect order of constituent parts of PVs occurs. However, in regard to our study, we encountered a large number of examples with the wrong use of prepositions such as; *get used on* instead of *get used to*, *stick on* instead of *stick to*, *get on* instead of *get in*, *write on* instead of *write in*, *take on* instead of *take in*, *look in* instead of *look at*, *put on* instead of *put off*, *bring in* instead of *bring on*, etc. Also, there were surprising examples and unnecessary practice of PVs such as: *pass away* instead of leave the country, *pass over* in a sense of passing the border (kaloj përtej kufirit), *face down* in a sense of facing something up (të përballosh diçka), etc.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident that we managed to conduct a considerate research on phrasal verbs with university students coming from different academic years and sharing various language backgrounds. Obviously, this research produces valuable information when it comes to the most commonly used PVs among foreign speakers at University of Tetova and at the same time, provides other linguists or researcher with the usual linguistic errors encountered when PVs are used in terms of language acquisition. The most common errors of students turned out to be of different types.

These errors occurred at syntactic, semantic, and especially in the idiosyncratic aspect and as a result, students and language teachers should pay better attention when it comes to learning and teaching PVs.

We also recommend periodic feedback on this grammatical area when testing students' knowledge and especially, intervening at the earliest stages of teaching phrasal verbs with the intention of achieving better learning results among language learners.

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