

Investigating ESL Engineering Learners' Knowledge of High-frequency Phrasal Verbs

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Abstract

Vocabulary is crucial for language development and communication enhancement, serving as a key indicator of proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, ESL students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face challenges in communication in English due to limited vocabulary. This study focuses on assessing lexical knowledge of students, specifically examining the knowledge of frequently used phrasal verbs within communicative contexts. The investigation included 105 first-year engineering students (60 male, 45 female) randomly selected from the Indian Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar.

The researcher initiated the assessment by administering a multiple-choice vocabulary test comprising an inventory of 150 high-frequency phrasal verbs, as compiled by Garnier and Schmitt (2015). The results revealed that only 50 students obtained a score between 100 and 120 out of 150 points on the test. This implies that the majority of students' phrasal verbs knowledge is moderate. Hence, it is important to improve their both knowledge and usage of phrasal verbs for effective communication skills. Therefore, this study suggests various strategies to enhance phrasal verb knowledge, such as incorporating short stories, focusing on the grammar of words,

using flashcards, engaging in sentence-writing practices, and incorporating images or videos showing phrasal verbs. Additionally, pedagogical implications are offered for syllabus designers and language instructors to include phrasal verbs in reading materials. In the end, future research has been highlighted.

Keywords: High-frequency phrasal verbs, ESL learners, communication enrichment and vocabulary development.

1. Introduction

Because English is used so widely as a lingua franca, a medium of teaching, and a communication tool, it has been acknowledged as an important language. People so frequently strive to become proficient communicators in English. One of the main tenets of language development is vocabulary acquisition, which promotes richer communication in a variety of contexts, including speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Vocabulary mastery is closely related to proficiency in these language areas. Dhuli, Lamo, & Larsari, (2023) stated that vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in fostering language skills. However, learning vocabulary is one of the difficulties that students face in order to master a second/foreign language. Addressing this problem is important for ESL educators to improve students' communication skills. Also, teachers should help equip students with an extensive vocabulary to support their language proficiency.

When we discuss vocabulary importance in second language learning, it is important to understand different subgroups of vocabulary, such as idioms, one word-substitution, and phrasal verbs. Gass and Selinker (2001) described phrasal verbs as an intermediate linguistic space between syntax and lexis. These constructs consist of an open-class component (the verb) combined with a closed-class element (the particle) (Howarth, 1998). But why should a student of a second language acquire phrasal verbs when their mother tongue does not have such a category of vocabulary? The clear answer to this question is that because phrasal verbs are part and parcel of English communication which in turn necessitates students to acquire PVs for effective communication. Even many studies have emphasized the importance of phrasal verbs in the English language learning. For example, Bieber et al. (1999) cited in Subramaniam, R.

(2018) observed that phrasal verbs are not only used in conversation, fiction and news but also academic writing. Although the creativity in language communication can be achieved by the presence of phrasal verbs, it does not help EFL or ESL learners' English be more native-like but understanding and using these PVs accurately in spoken and written English is important if the student try to improve an outright command of the language” (Sargeant, 1996: vii cited in Subramaniam, R. (2018). In addition, Garnier and Schmitt (2015a) asserted that approximately 30% of all verbs used in both written and spoken English are phrasal verbs. El-Dakhs, Sonbul, & Alwazzan (2021) further stated that the proficiency of phrasal verbs leads to comprehension and usage in both formal and informal discourse.

In delineating the significance of phrasal verbs, a noticeable gap emerges in the phrasal verbs of many ESL students. As native speakers use PVs often, but L2 learners have found them to be challenging to acquire. It's possible that students may come across a lot of English phrasal verbs in the classroom, but with time, they will forget and find it difficult to recollect them. For this reason, it's important to teach and include these verbs into course materials so that students will learn, remember and utilize them for communication. Consequently, this study seeks to investigate the knowledge of ESL learners in high-frequency phrasal verbs. The primary objectives are twofold: 1) to propose pedagogical recommendations for language instructors to include these verbs into course materials and 2) to offer strategies to enhance phrasal verbs for effective communication skills. The remaining sections of this paper deal with significance, background to the study, problem statement, objectives, methodology, results and discussion , phrasal verbs learning strategies, and finally conclusion and implications.

1.1 Significance of the Study

Effective communication is crucial for ESL students in the pursuits of their academic achievements, personal growth, and professional development. However, ESL students have weak communication skills due to having come from rural background, less exposure to English, and conventional teaching methods. To help improve students' communication skills, teachers have redirected their focus from grammar to vocabulary development, as they recognized that language skills thrive on a strong foundation of vocabulary knowledge. According to Nation (1990), the frequency of word usage is the main factor in selecting which vocabulary to be

prioritized for learning purposes. Hence, students, who have a limited fluency in English, should be guided to acquire high-frequency vocabulary as a priority. Therefore, this study advocates for language instructors to prioritize teaching high-frequency phrasal verbs, as they play crucial role in effective communication.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The majority of students struggle to remember phrasal verbs over extended periods of time. Regretfully, educators don't focus much on this problem, which is why their students struggle to remember phrasal verbs. Even the classroom materials do not contain PVs. Consequently students find it difficult to learn phrasal verbs and use them in communication. Therefore, this study proposes to examine the current level of vocabulary knowledge of ESL students and provide strategies to enhance PVs for language proficiency development.

1.3 The Aim and Objectives of Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the proficiency of ESL learners in high-frequency phrasal vocabulary.

The main objectives of this study are –

- To investigate the existing knowledge of ESL students' high-frequency phrasal verbs;
- To furnish strategies to teach and improve phrasal verb knowledge;
- To improve ESL learners' communication skills;
- To offer implications for ESL educators on integrating high-frequency phrasal verbs into their teaching resources and materials.

1.4 Research Question

- 1) At what level of knowledge do ESL learners fall in high-frequency phrasal verbs?

2. Literature Review

Phrasal verbs are essential part of language and inevitably used in both written and spoken communication. Phrasal verbs are defined as words which are combination of both a verb and a

particle. For instance, the phrasal verb “take on” is a phrasal verb that has the verb “take” and the particle “on.” They are orthographically regarded as two separate words. However, semantically, the verb and the particle are combined together. The particle is almost always similar to an adverb or a preposition that carries a number of semantic, syntactic and prosodic characteristics (Thim 2012).

Though phrasal verbs are important in communication they present some problems to ESL learners and these learners in turn tend to avoid learning them intentionally. Research on avoidance of phrasal verbs by ESL students has shown a consistent pattern. A study conducted by Dagut and Laufer (1985; 78) revealed that Hebrew-speaking intermediate EFL learners happened to make purposeful avoidance of PVs constructions by using standalone verbs with direct meaning. Houshyar (2013), Bin (2007), Becker (2014), and Liao (2004) found that less proficient learners tend to avoid using phrasal verbs, with Houshyar also noting a preference for literal over figurative phrasal verbs. Akbari (2009) further explored that higher proficiency levels were associated with a decrease in avoidance.

These studies collectively suggest that avoidance of phrasal verbs is a common issue among ESL students, particularly those at lower proficiency levels, and is influenced by the semantic complexity of the verbs. It can also be noted that first-language speakers are aware that “the system supporting phrasal verbs is semantically complex and that combinations show quite different levels of idiomaticity.... However, utilizing their unconscious knowledge, native speakers have no difficulty in understanding them [phrasal verbs]” (Armstrong 2004: 215). On the other hand, unlike native speakers, ESL learners are unable to use PVs effectively in communicative contexts. As a result these learners tend to use single verbs in place of PVs or sometimes avoid using PVs while communicating in English. Abid (2019) explained the reason behind ESL/EFL learners are unable to decode the meaning of phrasal verbs and unable to use them in communicative situations is that phrasal verbs in English take on a meaning that varies from the meaning of the constituent parts of a phrasal verb.

Another reason for ESL/EFL learners face problems in learning PVs is due to having come from socio-economic background, lack of exposure to English. In addition, lack of instruction to phrasal verbs in English language contexts makes it challenging for ESL/EFL students to learn

them. Furthermore, phrasal verbs are not covered in the majority of English language learning environments and are not enclosed in the majority of ESL/EFL books and materials used in the Indian context in general and rural schools and colleges in particular. So, equipping ESL students with phrasal verbs is important for instructors to improve students' communication in English. This can be possible only when the English material developers and syllabus designers include phrasal verbs in both EFL/ESL classrooms and instructional materials. Therefore, this study focuses on investigating the current level of high-frequency phrasal verbs of ESL engineering students and providing strategies to improve Phrasal verbs knowledge.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

All 105 (60 boys and 45 girls) ESL first-year graduates from IIT Bhubaneswar, India, during the academic year 2022–2023 make up the study's sample participants. On average, they were 17.5 years old. Throughout their +2 education, every student got classroom instruction in their mother tongues. In addition to coming from different areas of India for the B.Tech. Programme at the aforementioned college, they also came from a variety of schools and institutions with varying and little exposure to English. Due to the participants' similar educational backgrounds and exposure to the English language, they were selected at random.

3.2 Procedure

The methodology adopted in this study involved conducting a multiple-choice question test among the sample participants. The test was distributed through Google Forms, which requires students to choose the correct answer from the four options provided for each question. Each correct answer carries one point. So there were 150 questions for 150 points. After the exam, the researcher analyzed the responses obtained from Google Forms.

3.3 Research Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study is a list of 150 high-frequency phrasal verbs developed by Garnier and Schmitt (2015). This list provides different meanings of the same phrasal verb and

ranks the each meaning according to frequency (see **Appendix A**), and it also provides one example sentence for each meaning of phrasal verb.

4. Discussion and Results

1) At what level of knowledge do ESL learners fall in high-frequency phrasal verbs?

Table 1: Distribution of Students' knowledge Levels Based on Points Scored

S.No	Number of the Students	Percentage of the Students	Range of Points Scored out of 150	Level of Knowledge
1.	15	14.29%	120-140	High level
2.	50	47.62%	100-120	Moderate level
3.	22	20.95%	80-100	Basic level
4.	9	8.57%	60-80	Lower level
5.	7	6.67%	40-60	Limited level
6.	2	1.90%	20-40	Weak level

In order to answer the research question “At what level of knowledge do ESL learners fall in high-frequency phrasal verbs?”, it is important to consider the number of students, their percentage, range of points scored and knowledge level as per their performance in the test. Here we can observe that 15 students (14.29%) achieved scores in the range of 120-140 points, indicating a high level of knowledge in high-frequency phrasal verbs. 50 students (47.62%) attained scores between 100 and 120 points, reflecting a moderate knowledge level in high-frequency phrasal verbs. 22 students (20.95%) fell within the range of 80-100 points, suggesting a basic understanding of high-frequency phrasal verbs but with room for improvement. 9 students (8.57%) scored in the range of 60-80 points, indicating a lower knowledge level and a need for further development in mastering high-frequency phrasal verbs. 7 students (6.67%) obtained scores in the range of 40-60 points, signaling a limited grasp of high-frequency phrasal

verbs, requiring significant improvement. 2 students (1.90%) scored in the weak range of 20-40 points, indicating a notable challenge in understanding and using high-frequency phrasal verbs.

Based on the scores obtained by the sample participants it can be concluded that the majority of students have a moderate level of knowledge in phrasal verbs. The reasons behind students' moderate scores in phrasal verbs test can be attributed to many aspects, such as: they lack sufficient exposure to English; they are not explicitly taught in classroom, and their reading materials don't cover phrasal verbs. Taking these reasons into account, this study emphasizes the need for ESL instructors to teach and improve PVs. So that the students will improve them and be able to understand and use in communicative situation as and when required.

5. Phrasal Verbs Learning Strategies

Learning phrasal verbs is essential for communicative competence of ESL students. Besides, it is not as easy as learning grammar because there are hundreds of phrasal verbs in English. In this connection, teachers must advise students use the strategies to learn them in an effective manner. Moreover, ESL students should be taught phrasal verbs in an engaging manner using a variety of strategies that take into account their surroundings and everyday experiences. Here are some strategies:

1. To use short stories that focus on the grammar of phrasal words,
2. To engage students in sentence-writing practices with phrasal verbs,
3. To use phrasal verbs in contexts familiar to rural life. For instance, relate "take off" to farming (taking off crops) or "fix up" to repairing tools or buildings,
4. To incorporate images or videos showing phrasal verbs used in rural settings. So, it makes it easier for learners to visualize and understand their usage,
5. To design games like "Phrasal Verb Bingo" using rural-themed vocabulary to make learning enjoyable and interactive,
6. To use online platforms and apps with interactive exercises or videos that explain phrasal verbs in rural context,
7. To create quizzes or flashcards for practicing phrasal verbs in context,
8. To start with commonly used phrasal verbs and gradually introduce more complex ones,

9. To make use of glossaries with required phrasal verbs in reading materials.

6. Conclusion and Implications

To conclude, phrasal verbs are important for effective communication. Native speakers don't have any problems with PVs; they can easily use them in English communication. But Non-native speakers or ESL/EFL students find it challenging to learn and use PVs in communicative situations. When speaking in English and interacting with native English speakers, English language instructors and ESL/EFL students should be able to comprehend and utilize phrasal verbs. Since phrasal verbs are essential to improve communication skills, it is pivotal to investigate the level of students' PVs and provide suggestions to improve them.

As the researcher conducted a survey it was revealed that majority of the students lack phrasal verbs knowledge. Therefore, the study offers phrasal verbs learning strategies for teachers and students to develop high-frequency phrasal verbs. Also, the implications of this study are twofold: 1) teachers should put serious efforts to teach phrasal verbs to ESL learners through vocabulary activities and games, and 2) ESL instructors and syllabus designers should create lessons on high-frequency phrasal verbs in English language course books and ESL textbooks.

7. Future Research

Future research can be taken up to enhance high-frequency phrasal vocabulary through extensive reading instruction. As it has the potential to significantly improve communication skills, it is important to systematically investigate the impact of extensive reading on phrasal verbs acquisition. The findings can provide valuable insights that benefit material developers, and teachers for developing ESL students' 'vocabulary knowledge.

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Appendix A: High-frequency Phrasal Verb List compiled by Garnier and Schmitt (2015)

1. GO ON

1. Happen, take place (64.5%)

There is a debate going on right now between the two parties.

2. (+To) Proceed to do or tackle STH after doing STH else (13%)

Does anyone have any questions before I go on to the next chapter?

2. PICK UP

1. Get or take SB/STH from a place (70.5%)

Can you pick up some food on the way home from work please?

3. COME BACK

1. Return to a place or a conversation topic (96.5%)

She came back to the kitchen with a bottle of fancy wine.

4. COME UP

1. (+ with) Bring forth or produce (34%)

She instantly came up with a solution to the problem.

2. (Be coming up) Be happening soon (esp. be broadcast soon) (27.5%)

Coming up after the news, our cooking program will feature cheese.

Appendix B: Multiple-Choice Questions Test:

1. Sarah's teacher _____ that she had the highest score on the test.

- a) pointed out
- b) picked up
- c) grew up
- d) came back

2. When you leave your friend's house, you should _____ to your own home.



- a) find out
- b) go back
- c) go on
- d) come out

3. The play will _____ after a short break. So, get ready for the next play!

- a) find out
- b) come back
- c) go out
- d) go on

4. When the traffic light turns green, it's time to _____ and continue driving.

- a) go ahead
 - b) look back
 - c) wake up
 - d) take over
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