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Picking up polysemous phrasal verbs: How many do learners know and what facilitates this knowledge?



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates L2 learners' knowledge of highly frequent polysemous phrasal verbs in English, and the effect of a number of factors on this knowledge. 128 students on BA English/TEFL courses were recruited to take a productive test in the form of a gap-fill task. The results show that only 40% of phrasal verb meaning senses were known on average, with the chances of knowing all the different meaning senses of each phrasal verb tested being quite low at only around 20%. The factors of semantic opacity, previous L2 instruction, immersion in L2 environment, and year of BA study did not have any effect on knowledge. Conversely, corpus frequency was found to predict knowledge, along with time spent reading per week, and time spent social networking per week. No relationship was found between phrasal verb knowledge and the hours spent listening to music and watching films in English. The study confirms that phrasal verbs are a problematic feature of English vocabulary for many learners, and consequently deserve more attention – either via instructed contexts or outside the classroom in L2 language engagement.

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1. Introduction

It is now well-established that formulaic language is an essential part of the English lexicon, and thus should be known by L2 learners in order to produce fluent, competent language (Wray, 2002, 2008; *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 32, 2012). Phrasal verbs (hereafter PVs) are one category of formulaic language that is very common in English, especially in spoken discourse. In vocabulary studies, word frequency is roughly synonymous with usefulness; the more frequent a word in an L2, the more useful it is to know (Ellis, 2002; Nation, 2001). Therefore, there is little doubt that knowing highly frequent PVs is necessary for proficient language use, and that research is needed to gauge L2 knowledge of these items. However, PVs are highly polysemous (Gardner & Davies, 2007), and little research to date has taken this polysemy into account when studying L2 learner knowledge of PVs.

Furthermore, vocabulary research has begun to identify a number of factors which affect the learning of both individual words and formulaic sequences, most notably word frequency, semantic opacity, amount of L2 instruction, and degree of involvement/exposure with the language (Schmitt, 2010). Among the small number of studies which have looked at L2 knowledge of PVs, none has sought to assess the effect of these factors in combination. This study will address these gaps by

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investigating L2 learner knowledge of polysemous PVs, and by exploring the factors which relate to the learning of these various meaning senses.

2. Literature review

2.1. The importance of phrasal verbs in English vocabulary

There are several reasons why English PVs are important to learn. The first is that they have been found to be very frequent in everyday language. For example, based on a corpus search of the British National Corpus (BNC), Gardner and Davies (2007) estimate that learners will encounter, on average, one PV in every 150 words of English they are exposed to. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) estimate that PVs occur almost 2000 times per million words. PVs are therefore an important component of English vocabulary. Because they are widely used in spoken informal discourse, failure to use them in such situations is likely to make language sound unnatural and non-idiomatic (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007).

However, PVs are often considered to be one of the most challenging features of the English language. Firstly, they may be seen as an unnatural construction for some learners whose L1 lacks such a structure. Their syntactic peculiarity (some PVs allow for particle movement, others do not) and semantic complexity (some PVs have meanings that are highly idiomatic and opaque) make them particularly difficult to learn, and they are prone to avoidance (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). In addition, they are composed of two or more orthographic words, which means that instead of recognising them as single semantic units, unaware learners may attempt to decode the meanings of their individual components, and therefore misinterpret them.

2.2. L2 knowledge and use of phrasal verbs

Some previous research has suggested that because PVs are so challenging, L2 speakers typically use one-word verbs that are more or less synonymous instead (e.g. *postpone* instead of *put off*). For example, Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) found that advanced learners showed a strong preference for one-word verbs whereas native speakers showed a preference for PVs in about half of the cases. A number of studies have observed an avoidance phenomenon in PV use, which can be defined as the conscious decision from learners not to use a particular L2 form, although that L2 form is known (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

In addition, a number of studies have sought to quantify and compare the use of PVs in learner corpora as opposed to native corpora. For instance, Waibel (2007) found that the frequency of PVs in many sub-corpora of the ICLE (e.g. French, Italian, Spanish, Russian) is lower than that of the LOCNESS (a native corpus). A recent corpus study (Chen, 2013) explored Chinese university students' use of PVs in comparison with their American and British counterparts by comparing a corpus of learner English and four native corpora of two English varieties and two genres (argumentative and academic writing). The author concluded that, in general, the learners did not show a numerical difference from the native writers in PV use. However, this does not mean that the Chinese students' knowledge of PVs reached a native level, for at least two reasons. Firstly, as acknowledged by the author, their frequent use of PVs may be due to their highly frequent use of verbs in general. Secondly, the study does not tell us the distribution of PV use. It may be that some PVs were overused by being repeated again and again, even across writers.

To our knowledge, only two studies have directly measured L2 learners' knowledge of PVs. For example, Schmitt and Redwood (2011) found that most of their participants were able to recognise most of their tested PVs (65.2%) receptively, and about half of them productively (48.2%), which implied that participants had relatively good knowledge of the selected PVs considering their intermediate level of English. However, studies like Schmitt and Redwood have typically only looked at a single PV meaning sense. Unfortunately, this does not fit well with the finding by Gardner and Davies (2007) that PVs are highly polysemous. They found that the 100 most frequent English PVs as identified by their BNC search had 5.6 meaning senses on average. Future studies into knowledge of PVs will need to take this polysemy into account, in order to get a better account of learners' true knowledge of PVs.

2.3. The role of frequency in the acquisition of PVs

Frequency has long been considered an essential predictor of L2 vocabulary knowledge, i.e. the more frequent a word, the more likely it is to be known (Schmitt, 2010). It is widely recognized that learners generally acquire higher-frequency words before lower-frequency ones (Ellis, 2002; Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001; Nation, 2001; Nation & Waring, 1997). The question that thus arises is whether the same holds true for multi-word combinations such as PVs. However, because research interest in formulaic sequences is much more recent than research interest in vocabulary in general, the strength of the relationship has not been extensively documented. The few studies focusing on the relationship between frequency and knowledge of formulaic language typically involve collocations (e.g. Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008).

In reality, with the exception of tightly-controlled experiments where it is possible to either know or control for the number of exposures any learner receives, there is no way of knowing how many times any specific word or PV is encountered

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