

A PILOT STUDY IN LEARNING ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS

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This paper investigates the effect of learning conditions on phrasal verbs in adult ESL learners. It aims to find more effective learning conditions for phrasal verbs taking into account the influence of proficiency and the learner's first language. The study, which was designed as an experimental study, includes the following procedures: a pre-test/treatment/post-test. The experiment was conducted using Arabic and Korean learners, and they were divided into two proficiency levels (high and low levels) according to the results of the pre-test. The interaction between the learning condition (translation versus context), the proficiency level, and first language was studied. The semantic properties of phrasal verbs (transparent versus idiomatic phrasal verbs) were also examined. The study suggests that the context learning condition was more beneficial to Arabic participants whereas the translation learning condition was more beneficial to Korean participants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of multiword expressions to gain fluency in language learning has been asserted by many researchers (Wood, 2004; Folse, 2004). In particular, mastering them is considered an essential part of speaking skills. Comprehending the meaning of multiword expressions is essential, yet, it is not only in speaking or productive skills but also in listening or receptive skills. One of the reasons is that there are many layers and kinds of multiword expressions such as idioms, fixed expressions, phrasal verbs, prefabs etc (Moon, 1997; Wray, 2002). Amongst them, the present study narrowly focuses on phrasal verbs, which are considered a proper feature in English.

Phrasal verbs are usually found in grammar courses in the ESL/EFL curriculum, but they also appear in vocabulary textbooks. Since they are composed of the content word (verb) and the function word (particle), they can be dealt with either in vocabulary as multiword expressions, or in grammar, with regard to the transitivity and the separability. The present study will focus on the lexical aspects of phrasal verbs and their semantic properties. Many phrasal verbs do not have transparent meanings, so it is hard to know the whole meaning by combining the meanings of the components, verbs, and particles. Such idiomatic meanings make learners feel that they are difficult to learn and to use, although learners of English recognize their importance.

Even though the importance and the difficulty of learning phrasal verbs are recognized, there is little research on testing the factors that affect learning phrasal verbs so far. Thus, the

present study aims to investigate the effect of the learning conditions as well as the semantic properties on learning and retaining phrasal verbs. In order to narrow the scope of the study, two learning conditions, which are the context and the translation learning, will be investigated among Arabic and Korean speakers studying English.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Context and Vocabulary Learning

One of the common beliefs about lexical acquisition is that using context clues to guess the meaning of words is a good strategy. This is reflected in ESL/EFL vocabulary textbooks as well as being explored by some researchers. Cooper (1999) examined what is the most successful and common strategy to learn idioms by using a ‘think aloud’ protocol. His study shows that successful learners use an inferring strategy to learn idioms. The findings of this study can be interpreted as follows: using context can be a successful strategy in the teaching and learning of multiword expressions. However, with regard to the role of context in vocabulary learning, the results of the previous research are inconsistent. Hulstijn (1992) found that the learners who inferred the meaning of target words remembered them better than the learners who were given the meaning of target words. This study shows that inferring helps learners retain the meaning of words, yet the inferring of incorrect meanings from context was a drawback, especially when there were no context clues.

On the other hand, there are empirical studies (Prince, 1996; Qian, 1996) which show results that contradict those of Hulstijn (1992). These studies suggest that presenting words in context does not have a more positive effect on learning vocabulary than the presentation of words in isolation. Particularly, Prince (1996) compared the use of context and translation in learning words for French EFL learners. He compared these two conditions in the learning phase

as well as in the recall phase for two groups of learners, the advanced and the weak learners. For the context learning group, isolated sentences, including the target words, were given, and the subjects of the translation learning group were asked to write down the meaning of target words. After the treatment, he split each learning group into two recall conditions respectively and conducted an immediate post-test. He found that the advanced learners in the translation learning condition achieved more than those in the context learning condition. Although the overall scores of the weak learners were worse than the advanced learners, those in the translation condition showed slightly better scores than those in the context learning condition. Another empirical study by Qian (1996) obtained a similar result with regard to the effect of isolated vocabulary learning. He divided the learners into two groups; one group was given the L2 synonyms for the target words, and another group was taught the words by inferring the word's meaning from context. He concluded with an immediate recall test as well as two delayed recall tests, and found that the superiority of the isolated learning condition was maintained though the forgetting patterns of the two learning conditions were not different during three recall tests.

Another generally assumed effect of inferring from context is that it helps to retain knowledge. We can expect that the more context clues given, the better the chance of retaining the target words. With regard to the relationship of contextual richness to that of retention, Mondria and Wit-de Boer (1991) conducted experiments with French learners. They investigated whether contextual richness had influence on the predictability and retention of words based on Schouten-van Parreren's claim. The claim is that words are best learned when the meaning is inferred from the context, and the context has a clearly positive effect on retention. Mondria and Wit-de Boer gave subjects eight types of contexts, which were sentences including the target word. They conducted an experiment in which the hypothesis stated that the more often a word is

correctly inferred, the more often it is remembered. Yet the results showed that there was no correlation between inferring and retention of meaning.

In conclusion, the previous studies suggest that the use of context in learning vocabulary cannot guarantee its superiority in learning and acquisition. Nevertheless, as inferring from context is one of the most common strategies in vocabulary and reading courses, it will be meaningful to investigate the effect of context in learning phrasal verbs. Based on the results of the previous studies, it is expected that inferring the meaning of phrasal verbs from context will also not show the prominence in phrasal verbs.

2.2. Phrasal Verbs and Idiomaticity

It is generally admitted that phrasal verbs are thought to be one of the difficult items for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The reason is that some phrasal verbs have an idiomatic meaning, which is usually defined as the fact that “the meaning of the complex unit does not result from the simple combination of those of its constituents” (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997, p.161).

Dagut and Laufer (1985) found that Hebrew learners of English significantly preferred one-word expressions to phrasal verbs, while English native speakers did not. This is not surprising since learning phrasal verbs is more complex than learning single words because of their idiomatic meaning. With regard to the meaning of idiomatic phrasal verbs, Liao and Fukuya (2004) found that learners chose fewer figurative phrasal verbs than literal phrasal verbs on a multiple-choice test. They explained that this avoidance is due to the semantic difficulty of figurative phrasal verbs. From these findings, we can reason that the semantic properties of

phrasal verbs, i.e. transparent (or literal) versus idiomatic (or figurative), should be considered in the learning conditions.

In conclusion, the previous studies indicate that idiomatic phrasal verbs might be harder to learn than transparent phrasal verbs for ESL learners. Therefore, it will be necessary to investigate the effect of semantic properties of phrasal verbs and to examine the effective learning condition for idiomatic phrasal verbs.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study Design

This experimental study was designed to test the effectiveness of two different learning conditions, which are inferring the meaning of targeted phrasal verbs from context and the presentation of L2 – L1 pairs of phrasal verbs, for Arabic and Korean speakers. The framework of this study was adopted from Prince (1996), and sentential context was used in the context learning design. Prince (1996) investigated the direction of translation, which was from L1 to L2 or from L2 to L1, but no significant difference was found between them. Thus, this study only considered the direction from L2 to L1. In addition, this study was conducted not in a classroom, but in a laboratory setting.

3.2. Subjects and Setting

All sessions of this study took place in the PC lab of the Robert Henderson Language Media Center at the University of Pittsburgh. All of the subjects were studying at the English Language Institute for the Summer term of 2006. The study began with 34 students, but was completed by 26 of them. There were 11 Arabic speakers and 16 Korean speakers. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old, and all of the participants have had prior, formal instruction in English, mostly at the secondary school and college levels. The subjects were aware that they were

participating in a research study, and they were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research. They also knew that their test scores would neither be disclosed nor affect their grades. They were told that they would take a test on the phrasal verbs that they learned and exercised from the computer programs, since this study was designed as intentional vocabulary learning (Husltijn, 2003).

Participants in each language group were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups according to their proficiency level. These four groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. The Number of Participants

Language	Treatment	N (pre-test)	N (post-test1)	N (post-test2)
Arabic	CL – TR	4	2	2
	CL – CR	5	5	2
	TL – TR	4	3	3
	TL – CR	4	4	3
Korean	CL – TR	4	4	4
	CL – CR	4	4	4
	TL – TR	5	4	4
	TL – CR	4	4	4
Total		34	30	26

Note. CL (context learning), CR (context recall), TL (translation learning), TR (translation recall).

3.3. Materials

Although research on multiword expressions has increased in the second language acquisition, as well as in the corpus linguistics in recent years, there are few previous studies that measure the frequency of phrasal verbs. Therefore, the target phrasal verbs in this study were randomly selected from *the American Heritage Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (2005), and *NTC's Dictionary*

of *Phrasal Verbs* (1993). When selecting the phrasal verbs, their semantic properties were considered, and 9 idiomatic and 10 transparent phrasal verbs were selected.

In the pre-test, the test items were 20 target phrasal verbs and 30 distractor phrasal verbs. The pre-test was basically designed as a check-list test, which requires test-takers to check whether or not they know the words. This type of test has been used as one of the most popular placement tests, although it has a weak point in that learners do not overtly demonstrate their knowledge of the tested words (Nation, 2001). Thus, the present study added a column for writing the meaning, and the subjects were asked to show their knowledge of the verbs in their native language. The 49 test items were presented in alphabetical order (see Appendix A).

As was briefly mentioned before, the treatment material was created by using a rapid application software tool, *Revolution*, and there were three versions, i.e. context, Arabic translation and Korean translation. All three of the versions consisted of 44 screens divided into two parts, the exposure part and the training part, and the 20 targeted phrasal verbs were used in each part. The present study was originally designed to adjust the list of the target phrasal verbs used in the treatment according to the pretest results, but due to administrative setbacks and the time limitation of developing the learning program, the list of phrasal verbs was maintained. When analyzing the influence of the phrasal verbs, the known items were excluded from the data.

A tutorial screen, which demonstrates how to use the program, preceded each part. Each screen of the program was shown for 15 seconds in the exposure part and for 20 seconds in the test part. When the time per screen ends, “Your time is up” is shown, and the card turns over automatically.

In the context version, the users can see the sentence context which includes the targeted phrasal verb. The sentences were created by providing the contextual clues which allow the

learners to infer the meaning of the target phrasal verbs. A glossary is provided for some words which seemed to be difficult for learners in the low proficiency level, thus helping the learners to comprehend the meaning of the whole sentence. In Figure 1, an example screen of the context learning program is presented.

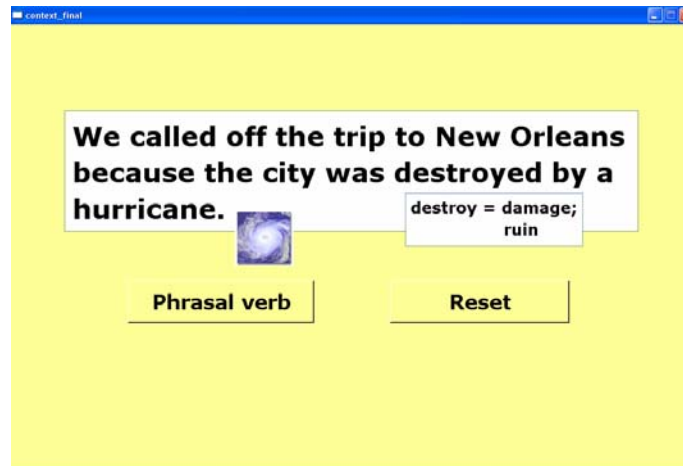


Figure 1. Learning phase of the context version

As the exposure part of the translation version, each target phrasal verb was presented on a separate screen. The learners could see the translated L1 equivalent expression by clicking the “translation” button, and could repeat this procedure by clicking the “reset” button on the same screen.



Figure 2. Learning phase of the Arabic translation version

In the training part, the subjects confirmed their knowledge by solving the multiple-choice exercises. The order of phrasal verbs was randomly scrambled in the training part, and put in alphabetical order in the exposure part to prevent the subjects from choosing the answers according to alphabetical order. Among many possible exercise types, the reason for choosing a multiple-choice test among the other possible test types is that it has an advantage of making learners focus on the particular meaning of an item which may have more than one meaning (Nation, 2001). In the training part, three options were given, while false synonyms were avoided because this test was not intended to trick the learners. The task was to drag a question mark to one of the three options shown under the phrasal verbs. If the users chose the correct option and put the question mark on it, “Correct!” showed below the option. Otherwise, no feedback was shown, and the users had to try again to find the correct answer. In Figure 3, an example screen of the Korean translation version is presented.

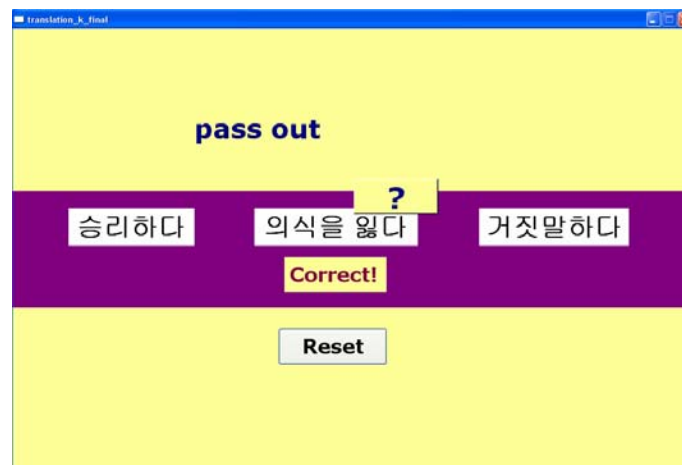


Figure 3. Training phase of the Korean translation version

Both translation versions, Arabic and Korean, were exactly identical except for the translated expressions. For the Arabic version, a bilingual speaker of Arabic and English

translated the items into Arabic. The context version's procedures on the test were the same as in the translation version.

Lastly, the post-test materials were designed as written tests. There were two versions of the post-test materials: the translation and the context versions. In the translation version of the post-test, the subjects were given a list of 20 targeted phrasal verbs and were required to translate them into their native language within the 15 minutes provided. In addition, the phrasal verbs were presented in alphabetical order (see Appendix B-1). In the context version of the post-test, the subjects saw 20 sentences with blanks that needed to be filled in with targeted phrasal verbs by choosing the proper one from the examples (see Appendix B-2). The order of the test items was scrambled to prevent subjects from choosing the answers automatically, and 15 minutes were given for this test.

3.4. Procedures

This study was conducted through three time sessions: the pre-test, the treatment and immediate post-test, and the delayed post-test sessions. Prior to the treatment, a 20-minute written pre-test was administered (see Appendix A). The purpose of the pre-test was to determine the learners' proficiency levels and to see their knowledge of phrasal verbs. According to the pre-test results, the participants in each language group were randomly assigned to one of four groups respectively. The participants in each group used the computer programs in the main treatment session. There were three versions of the program, which were designed with a rapid application development software tool, *Revolution*. The three versions were context, Arabic translation, and Korean translation versions.

The main treatment was conducted one week after the pre-test, and the immediate post-test was conducted on the same day of the treatment. During the first 20 minutes of the treatment session, the participants were given the computer program to learn the targeted phrasal verbs. Before starting, they were informed that after the learning session they would take a test of what they had learned from the program. The programs were designed to run during a fixed time frame, so an individual participant could not finish their learning session earlier. After the learning session, they watched part of an animated movie for 20 minutes, in which the targeted phrasal verbs were not included to distract their attention from the previous learning phrase. After this phase, the participants took an immediate post-test. The post-tests consisted of two kinds of materials, and each person was given one of them. The delayed post-test was conducted two weeks after the immediate post-test using the same materials.

Table 2. Experimental Procedures

Week	Test/Treatment	Group	Activity
1	Pre-test	All	Giving the translation in L1
2	Treatment	Context	Inferring the meaning from sentence context
		Translation	Exposure to the L1 translation
	Post-test 1	Context	Completing the sentence context by choosing and writing the phrasal verbs
		Translation	Giving the meaning of phrasal verbs in L1
4	Post-test 2	Context	Completing the sentence context by choosing and writing the phrasal verbs
		Translation	Giving the meaning of phrasal verbs in L1

3.5. Scoring and Data Analysis

The results of the pre-test and the post-tests were scored according to the number of correct answers. The total possible number of correct answers was 49 for the pre-test and 19 for the post-tests, since one target item was missing in the pre-test material. The raw scores were used in the statistical analysis, and the percentage was also considered in calculating the rate of retention.

In the beginning of the present study, a four-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was supposed to be used as a statistical test on the assumption that more than 40 subjects would participate in this study. However, this study began with 34 participants, 30 people participated in the immediate post-test, and only 26 participants remained in the delayed post-test. Due to small sample size and the abnormal sampling distribution, a non-parametric statistical test was used to analyze the results. Wilcoxon signed ranks tests were used because this is the non-parametric equivalent of a t-test, and it does not require the normal distribution of the samples (Bulter, 1985).

3.6. Research Questions

The research questions and hypotheses that examined in this study are as follows:

Research Question 1. How, and to what extent, do the different learning conditions have an effect on learning and retention of phrasal verbs?

Hypothesis 1. Relying on the results of the previous empirical studies (Prince 1996; Qian 1996), the learners in the translation condition will learn more than those in the context condition. However, the retained knowledge will be superior in the context learning groups.

Research Question 2. What effect does proficiency have on the learning and retention of phrasal verbs?

Hypothesis 2. The learners in the high proficiency level will not be affected by the learning conditions, though the results of the translation condition might be slightly superior to those of the context condition.

Research Question 3. How and to what extent does a learner's native language effect the learning and retention of phrasal verbs?

Hypothesis 3. Relying on the results of Fender (2003), the contextualized learning will be more effective for Arabic learners due to their orthographic knowledge in Arabic and processing skills. However, for Korean learners, translation will be more effective due to their learning experience.

Research Question 4. How and to what extent do the semantic properties of phrasal verbs effect the learning and retention of phrasal verbs?

Hypothesis 4. It might be harder to obtain the meaning of idiomatic phrasal verbs in the context learning condition than in the translation condition. Although the translation condition does not give more contextual cues, the idiomatic meaning of phrasal verbs will be clear to learners.

