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# Use of Single- vs. Multi-word Verbs in the Written Discourse of Iranian EFL Learners

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**ABSTRACT** Age is being evermore complained as an impediment to language competency, either given as a pretext or raised as a real challenge, taken for granted by foreign language learners. This study seeks to prod about the verb choices among EFL learners. In so doing, the two completely different radiuses of EFL learners, a group of university students in distance education, with part-time class participation and another from a private language institute in Qom province were recruited and compared on their choices of verbs in respect of single- and multi-word forms put into the written tasks. The results of the rating of the students' assignments showed that adult Iranian EFL learners' written language was deprived of phrasal verbs, even in informal writing assigned the use of informal language were scarcely captured. The study corroborates the former studies for the avoidance and incompetency of EFL learners in the use of phrasal verbs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Age is believed to have influence on language learning and acquisition and distinctively on vocabulary learning and usage. Language style manifests itself in use of words and syntactical features, influenced by many factors of which age is determinant. [11] adumbrates a number of factors affecting the style of language. It has been confirmed by myriads of studies that adult language learners are predisposed to obtain and use more formal language than informal one in comparison with young learners. Maturity inclines adults to acclimatize to social norms and helps them cognitively to differentiate between formal and informal registers and revere to appropriateness of language for the context of use.

Learning informal language seems to be a daunting task and harder for adult and old foreign language learners. This may stem from the plasticity loss and speediness and burdensome nature of informal language overshadowing brain processing. Phrasal verbs and idioms can also fall in informal language register [16]. Formal style is used when there it dominates a distance between interlocutors, spiced with passive voices and long words. Informal style, in contrary, is laden with colloquial when formality barriers are broke as in intimate speech between members of a close network. This kind of speech is fraught with contractions and short words [16].

Under rubric of five clocks, formal speech is classified on a lower velocity plane *vis-a-vis* other classes. Formal speech is tantamount to slower tempo and informal speech as to more speedier than formal one, which is closer to natural and automatic speech. Informal language is proximate and has vicinity to natural and automatic speech, in which young foreign language learners are more advantageous than adults in it.

Young learners have a head start over adult in acquiring language naturally as claimed by critical period hypothesis [15]. However, the controversy over age affecting language acquisition in respect of Critical period hypothesis (henceforth CPH) continues to exist. Younger learners are better than older counterparts at the acquisition of morphosyntax [8].

Due to plasticity loss, adults resort to information processing to learn foreign language which in effect predisposes them more to learn one-word verbs than phrasal verbs as long as cues compete in terms of constrain differences ascribed to retrieval of these kinds of words [7, 12]. Adults are inclined to pick more formal language either as a tendency to be more polite or by their loss of in their brain plasticity for appearing more automatic user and sounding naturally.

Formal and informal languages are used both as means of communication in writing. Age is believed to be influencing pronunciation more than lexis and syntax. Memorization and retention of formal words are easier for adult than informal ones. Formal words are liable to slow enunciation and are prone to less top and tailing *vis-a-vis* informal words which are cut short to a great many times and in need of speedy maneuver. According to [17], non-English speakers have difficulty in understanding and remembering phrasal verbs both as [18] used to name them as ‘the scourge of the learner’.

However, learning of phrasal words appears to be a daunting task for EFL learners due to cross-linguistic differences, the convoluted make-up of phrasal verbs, their incompetency and existing psychological barriers. The adults make more formal word choices and are interested in using more formal words. It seems that learning phrasal verbs are difficult because of their linguistics constructs [3]. Learning informal words seems to be harder than informal ones as they differ distinctively in their proposition while being alike in their voices and aspects. Informal words are made with minor changes in satellite propositions. The teenagers, as quicker learners of foreign language than adults, then, should have little difficulty in using multiple-words and should be using more phrasal words in their speech or writing as a result.

Multi-word verbs are believed to be more difficult to be learnt and retrieved than single-word ones and with children’s thinking processes to be more protean than adults in respect of learning foreign language. According to [19], erstwhile research connotes that English learners often have difficulty with multi-word verbs and may even eschew use of them. As part of this study, verb choice is going to be scrutinized as the style marker. It was hypothesized that adult language learners are hardwired to learn and use informal words to a great extent than formal ones in their scripted language performance.

The issue which is of much significance and should not be easily forgotten in adult language leaning is the influence of first language. Young learners are less vulnerable to this impact than adult ones as they are matured and grown into it less than adults. Whenever adults are on the second language production plane their language is prone to translation of first language. According to fundamental identity hypothesis learner’s grammaticality is influenced by first language language than CPH.

To examine the hypothesis under question, these research questions were proposed:

- 1) Do phrasal verbs occur in Iranian EFL university students’ writing?
- 2) Do Iranian institute EFL learners use formal language in their formal written discourse?

## 2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Formal words are those interchanged between more distant participants to safeguard the politeness in exchange of information. Informal ones are those used in everyday practices of communication by intimate and close interlocutors. According to [16], phrasal verbs (also called multi-word or multi-part verbs) are prevalent in spoken English and usually appear less formal than their one-word verb equivalents.

In a study, [19] investigated native speakers and advanced non-natives’ probable uses of multi-word vs. one-word verbs. The results of 26 multi-word/one-word verb pair questioner denoted the use of multi-word verbs in informal spoken contexts was less likely by non-natives than native speakers. Furthermore, the study revealed that the extent of exposure to native-speaking environments did not have any impacts on the likelihood of the multi-word verbs use. By the same token, the corpus analysis of the same verb pairs evinced more frequency of the single-word verbs in both written and spoken discourse.

[3] examined the effect of direct teaching of phrasal words inspired by cognitive linguistics approach in the language laboratory on 49 first-grade EFL students’ performances in four groups with their first language being French in Belgium with English as a compulsory course subject. Thirty phrasal verbs were chosen of which fifteen were incorporated in the course materials used in

language labs. Other phrasal verbs not incorporated in the course materials were introduced incidentally while conducting the experiment. All four teachers involved in the experiment made cautionary effort not to introduced these phrasal verbs anywhere unless in the experiment hours. One week later, a post-test was given identical to the pre-test with a six-week delayed post test identical to immediate post-test likewise, with a twenty-minute time to answer the questions. Meanwhile, students took their other tests in other subjects in their first language than English or any other language. Cautions were taken not to put any verbs encountered unplanned into the analysis so that two phrasal verbs encountered unscheduled were eliminated in the analysis as teachers reported of their encounters. The experimental group A outperformed significantly better than group B in instructed phrasal verbs even in delayed tests though a small significant outperformance was reported for encountered verbs in both post-tests. The explicit instruction did not come into effect for experimental group in this class at least for remembering and processing encountered phrasal verbs. The experimental group in class B did not report any significance differences than group B with regard to either taught or encountered phrasal verbs. However, group B reported more gain of before lab interactive encounters than experimental one. Teaching through CL approach had impact on the enhancement of learning of phrasal verbs. CL motivated better retention for experimental group. The longer the experiment's time span took, the better the results for experimental group were observed. It should be added that albeit students enjoyed the same teaching materials and teachers, phrasal verbs and teaching methods their classes were differently held in respect of time as it affects concentration and productivity.

The study done by [6] demonstrated that any text or sentence can be classified based on formal or informal style. [2], using relative formality judgments on word pairs, were almost successful at arbitrating the lexicon formality though scouring a small diverse corpus. They concluded that a more elaborated method and larger corpus are needed if accurate results are sought. [4] introduced a model for text classification characteristics of formal and informal style. They took phrasal words as "text genre identifiers" in the form yardsticks for differentiating formal and informal types by taking into account the frequency of occurrence spoken phrasal verbs versus written text, and on formal versus informal texts. Degree of formality of texts can also be indicated by a formality score (FS) measurement, in the range of -1 to 1, invented by [9], hinged upon the frequencies of different word classes (noun, adjective, preposition, article, pronoun, verbs, adverbs, interjection) in the corpus.

[20] pored over the way young Japanese EFL learners develop the multiword verbs (henceforth MWV's) use, focusing on common MVW's in a learner corpus. The findings divulged some discrepancies between types and frequencies of use of MWV's in the Japanese EFL corpus of the non-advanced non-natives at different developmental stages (beginners, post-beginners, and pre-intermediate learners) and native English speakers' *British National Corpus* (BNC). Very circumscribed types of phrasal verbs were seen in non-advanced learners' repertoires and there were more variation of prepositional verbs, lexical verb + preposition vis-à-vis phrasal verbs which is put to lexical deficiencies. In the matter of MWV items and their frequencies, Japanese EFL learner corpus (JEFLC Corpus) is diverse across the BNC and young learners. More use of MWV's in respect of types and frequencies, were seen by non-advanced in the developmental stages especially at pre-intermediate school level. The study concluded that it was advised to consciously and systematically teach MWV levels comprising basic lexical verbs and MWV's as chunks at pre-intermediate grades. Riguel (2014) scoured the gradual development of verb-particle constructions in child language by dint of examination of longitudinal data from the spontaneous oral speech of Naima, an English-speaking girl from the Providence Corpus of the CHILDES database (Child Language Data Exchange System) between ages 0;11 and 3;10. From among top ten verb-particle construction types generated by Naima and her mother the most verbs were light verbs class in phrasal verbs as they are acquired by children at a very early age.

A study done by [10] revealed that less proficient Iranian EFL learners appear, more frequent avoidances of using phrasal verbs are seen. The avoidance behavior was imputed to the semantic complexity of phrasal verbs, especially more for figurative phrasal verbs than literal ones. Abdul

Rahman and Abid (2014) investigated the use of Omani student-teachers' use of phrasal verbs in the written discourse through tests of production and recognition. The findings revealed phrasal verbs were sparse or non-existent in Omani students' writing.

[5] assessed 407 Egyptian undergraduates at a private English-medium university through a survey, two gap-filling completion and paraphrase tasks. With the administration of pre-study survey, frequent verbs indicated by majority of the participants' subjective knowledge were sieved. Avoidance of the use of phrasal verbs in production tasks was patent in the study. The study concluded that the scarcity of phrasal verbs in the participants' production can be imputed to cross-linguistic differences, passive learning for comprehension, and limited language exposure.

### 3. METHOD

#### Participants

Two samples of learners from two different educational systems were recruited in the study. Sampling was adopted on availability yardstick. One university classroom from distance education in Qom, Iran, majoring in EFL; all studying English as a foreign language with part-time attendance (n=30) and private language institute in Qom, Iran (n=15), where students took the courses voluntarily beyond conventional schooling of Iranian educational curriculum, incurring the payment for their course of studies, comprised the participants of the current study. It should be notified that the students are admitted to university sieved by dint of selection test, which is rendered after the completion of high school grades in which English is taught throughout the years of study as a compulsory course.

For the ease of report for the study, students at university classroom assigned label A and students in institute were labeled class B. The participants for this study comprised more of female students than male ones, as the population of female students in Iran outnumbered educational attendances. No homogeneous pre-tests of proficiency were administered for the university students as all the university students previously passed through selection test for accepting from high school into university set by Iran's educational measurement system. The students were also at the same grade at university level and all were passing the same courses.

#### Procedure

The students were granted the leeway to choose for them to participate or not in the study and that to control for the observer's paradox, teachers' and the social biases, it was attempted for student's confidentiality to be preserved by asking them not to mention their names. Static-group comparison design was mobilized to scrutinize groups under question. One group was subjected to treatment while another group did receive no treatment, with both groups not going through any pre-tests.

For the convenience of grouping, experimental group was named group A and the teenager student group at private institute was assigned group B receiving no instruction. Group A was exposed to instruction on differences between formal and informal styles of writing and those of one-word and multi-word verbs. The students were examined for their writing in two consecutive tests, in-class and out of the class, in two different times with time span of two weeks. The students were not allowed to use dictionary in in-class tasks. No explicit teaching of phrasal verbs was incorporated as part of the study and familiarity of the students with the previous encounters was sufficed. The experiment group was taught only on informal and formal language differences and usage of single-and multi-word verbs in one-half time lesson. They are introduced just as verbs along with its particles and propositions.

Group A was instructed on the difference between formal and informal writings and also on single- and multi-word verbs usage contexts. They were informed that phrasal verbs are unusual to be seen in formal speech and writing. They were notified also of idiomatic construction of some phrasal verbs and that phrase cannot be grasped by sum of its components separately and should be taken as whole.

Textbooks for distance education in EFL at university in Iran did not explicitly introduce phrasal verbs and modularized them in a separate part, bracketing the scope of its usage, where more weight of education is upon self-study. Phrasal verbs, however, were introduced incidentally in the oral presentation of the story and talking and listening courses. However, distance education in Iran has provided a course on idiom usage albeit the participants of the current study have not passed it at the time. The courses undergone by group A were certain of incorporating the materials bristled with informal and formal writing registers both. Listening, reading and writing were the main skills practiced by this group as the curriculum designed for the distance education aimed for enriching proficiency in speaking skill due to time limit.

University students for this study group were at the same grade in the same department and the same courses undergone. No test of homogeneity for the knowledge of verbs was taken and the books were not inspected for its supply of phrasal verbs for the learners. No input was provided supplemented to the compulsory courses incorporated into the curriculum.

One half hour was designated for the instruction on single- and multi-word verbs differences and their corresponding usage. The students in experiment group were introduced examples of some phrasal verbs such as '*put up with*' and its equivalent single-word counterpart '*tolerate*' and their appropriate context of use.

Group A underwent two rounds of tests. In first round, they were assigned on-off written tasks in class and in the second round they were given off-line task of about one week to write on a subject matter designated. In their first round of classroom assignment they were not allowed to use dictionary or other additional auxiliary materials to complete their assignments. However, in the out of classroom assigned tasks they had access to aiding materials and resources to do their tasks.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students' written tasks were rated for the absolute number of phrasal verbs and single-word verbs. The students were informed that they will not be assigned any score for their production and the results will not influence their future assessment ensured by keeping their privacy through anonymous participation. Their written essays were not rated for grammaticality and semantic appropriacy and transparency. The tests were only rated for the appearance of verbs in term of single- and multi-word forms.

The rating was done by the researcher as one-rater scorer of the samples collected. Group A used formal language in their tests of the informal writing and almost all the verbs used by them in these tests were limited to single-word verbs and no traces of phrasal verbs were observed in the writing tests assigned.

Group A comprising adult EFL university students were assigned to write two kinds of written tasks; a written task of formal one and another informal one. To write a report about personal experiences in the memory of holiday are likely to be written in informal rather than formal style. There were no significant improvements in application of informal verbs in online and off-line tasks assigned though quantity of written tasks in offline in respect of length and number of phrasal verbs were improved to much greater extent but still students show signs of incompetency in using phrasal verbs in their assignment. It can be construed that even with accessibility to recourses for differentiating between formal and informal verbs still students had resorted to formal single-word verbs to complete their informal written tasks. It is onus for EFL university students to surf entry words in dictionary to find about apposite phrasal verbs. It should be added that use of phrasal verbs for single-word counterparts is the major source of difficulty for their idiomatic construction and their conjugation misconception both which is evaded by EFL learners to look up unless previously encountered and memorized incidentally.

Materials introduced to the students in group B were to a great extent circumscribed to informal register and speaking proficiency was practiced for production skills as these institutes promulgated to pursue. Students in group B show the signs of incompetency in their formal written skills. Group B was asked to write a letter to their principal sharing their class and schools' educational problems. The hypothesis proved to be incorrect for the research questions two which stated that students in

group B are tending to use formal verbs in their written tasks. It was observed that teenagers lacked the formal verbs to use in their written tasks. However, more informal verbs used by them were of the single-word type, but they were not pursuant to a formal addressing. Group B used informal language and words for their formal written tasks assigned. Some students used a mixture of formal and colloquial styles in their writing tasks. Little encounters with formal verbs were the major reasons for the group B not to be able to provide formal verbs in formal written tasks. However, teenager students studying at private institutes were incompetent to sufficiently formally communicate in formal tasks assigned.

Written production of the adult language learners were reminders of the formality of language that are used to, even when they render it in the tasks of informal types. Children are believed to show propensity for learning phrasal verbs sooner than their formal equivalences. The students have not adequate phrasal verbs stored in their memories or don't have the dexterity to put them into practice. The results of out of classroom one-off test for adult university students denote that they tend to avoid reach the phrasal verbs because of time-consuming in the verbs' semantic translation. Though the materials produced into the distance education program incorporate phrasal verbs in some courses but burdensome semantic processing coming with these forms of verbs motivate learners to eschew memorization of these verbs unless much practice and frequency come into play.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Cross-checking of the adults and teenagers' scripted papers both revealed that written language of the adults in the informal written tasks were replete with formal words than informal ones, that is, they, even, in the informal written tasks assigned had inadequacy to bring on their papers formal words. Phrasal verbs were more frequent than formal single-word synonyms in young EFL learners' writing than that of adults. It was revealed that students are not self-motivated to look up and use phrasal verbs in their off-line written tasks.

Incognizant of stylistic circumscription and register, the students may use alternate informal one viz., phrasal verbs for formal one. First language may influence proclivity of the learners to choose more formal language in their production. Socio-cultural impacts of language on learners also should never be ignored. However, prior knowledge of verbs also should be controlled for the research to render a better result.

EFL learners sound more near-native and natural using of phrasal verbs in their speech which commands attention of curriculum developers to incorporate more presentation of informal language in the EFL programs at university level to keep the balance of formal and informal language. The current research corroborates incompetency of the learners in using phrasal verbs in their product writing tasks. However, the study can be deemed as a precursor to a true experimental design study.

Future research may scrutinize adults and teenagers more delicately in qualitative studies by giving treatment post-test and pretest in a way of extending an equal distribution of lexicon of formal and informal words to the subjects and examining the propensities and competencies of them in learning and using these words. This study, likewise, can be adapted for examining dispersions of formal and informal word in speech production skill of adults and teenagers. Developmental stages of learners can be scrutinized for pinpointing the actual development in learning and using of phrasal verbs.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

As it was mentioned galore in the literature, adult foreign language learners are more adroit in the formal language domain since they are known to harness information-processing for learning after the puberty. The study will be of significance for language practitioners and educators to notify the importance of phrasal words and its contributions to the students for handling informal communication and likewise in that to notice them that they are slow in acquisition of informal

language and are probably crippled in the automatic use of informal language if they are post-puberty learners. To control for simplistic language exercised in the institutes, teachers can expose subjects to two kinds of styles, formal and informal ones, both, and then post-test them for the proclivity and capacities to learn and use words against time span and course of time. It also demands more calls for language teachers to invest more time to teach adult learners informal language and to examine their inclination and adeptness in learning formal and informal words likewise. The study is of much significance for novice learners to mull over more on the use of verb-words, pursuant to apposite register. Doing a corpus study is encouraged within the context of Iranian EFL learners over similarities and discrepancies of use of multiple verb-word features. First language and cultural influences also should come into consideration when writing products and styles are studied. More experimental research is advised to scour meticulously the differences in learning of single- and multi-word verbs for adult and teenagers. Curriculum developers and educators in EFL departments are also urged to keep incorporating and introducing more of phrasal verbs and their importance in adult education.

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