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INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English major students at a university in Binh Duong. Data were collected through small group interviews and a corpus of 150 academic writings. The findings revealed that particle verbs, prepositional verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs were the most commonly used types of phrasal verbs. The functions of phrasal verbs included expressing cause and effect, describing processes, and signaling transitions between ideas. The reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students were related to linguistic factors, such as the desire for variety and the influence of L1 transfer, and academic factors, such as a lack of awareness of the expectations of academic writing in English. This study contributes to understanding the utilization of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English major students. The findings highlight the types and functions, providing valuable insights into their role in academic writing.

Keywords: *academic writing, English, function, phrasal verb, reason*

1. Introduction

English is an international language used to present scientific research at conferences around the world. However, using English fluently is a challenge for people from non-English speaking countries, including Vietnam and other countries around the world. To write a scientific article in English, English as Second Language (ESL) learners must spend a lot of time learning and looking up how to use unknown phrases (Vu and Burns, 2014). If a student learns the grammar in general and the verb phrase well, the language they use will become natural and the student's English level will also improve. Phrasal verbs are widely uby the native speakers of English in oral and written communication. According to Mahmoud. (2015) states that most native English speakers often use one or more phrasal verbs in their daily life. It can be said that most of the sentences, paragraphs, novels, films, speech in English use phrasal verbs. It means as the learner of English, the students could not ignore the use of phrasal verbs in their daily life.

Academic writing plays a crucial role in higher education, particularly in the context of A university in Binh Duong in Vietnam, where students are expected to produce high-quality academic papers, including scientific research and theses. However, many English learners, including English majored students at a university in Binh Duong, struggle with using phrasal verbs in their writing, which can result in imprecise language and lower grades. Therefore, This study is designed to examine the utilization of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the types of phrasal verbs used in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong? (2) What are the functions of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong? (3) What are the underlying

reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students at a university in Binh Duong?

2. Literature review

2.1. Definitions of phrasal verbs

There are many definitions of phrasal verbs. According to Alexander Longman noted by Side (1990), one of the outstanding features of verbs in English is that it can be combined with prepositions and nouns. Broadly speaking people call this association the phrasal verbs. Meanwhile, Hornby (1995)'s definition says that phrasal verbs (also called verbs of more than one word: multi-word verbs) are verbs consisting of two or three words. One of the words must be a verb and it is followed by an adverb or a preposition or both. According to Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaun (1973), at University Grammar of English-Longman Group UK Limited, the definition of verb phrases is used a lot as that a phrasal verb is a verb with two elements, the main verb and a sub-verb that follows it

2.2. The use of phrasal verbs in academic writing

Stemming from the perception that there is a connection between syntax and semantics, authors such as Fortescue (2010), Goddard (2009), Brems (2010) argue that different syntactic frames (Goddard), different syntactic behavior (syntactic behavior, Fortescue), different textures (construction by Goldberg) or different combinations (combinaterics, Evan and Winlkins) are often the basis for separating polysemy. The problem is, all dictionary compilations are based on the grammatical model to separate multiple meanings, but the number of meanings for each case of multiple meanings is still not the same. In fact, if students absolutize this criterion, they will not be able to deal with the cases where the polysemy is noticeably clear but share the same grammatical form.

In academic writing, the verb is especially important because it shows the reader how the research is "done." Essay writing is nothing but documenting the process of “doing” research. Precise use of verbs is the key to describing research accurately (Trebits, 2009). In academic writing, verb phrases are less formal. This is mainly because phrasal verbs often have multiple meanings and are not concise enough. To distinguish between formal and informal expressions just pay attention to the following two points. First, formal expressions are usually made with exact and specific words with unique meanings. Second, formal expressions, especially in scientific research, are usually more concise than informal ones. Obviously, verbose expressions will reduce the efficiency of information transmission (Alsagoafi, 2013). Verbs are especially important in academic writing because they show readers how research is "done." Writing a dissertation is simply documenting the "doing" of the research process. Accurate use of verbs is the key to accurately describing research

2.3. Functions of phrasal verbs

The functionality of phrasal verbs is divided into: Semantic functions and Syntactic functions. In particular, Semantic functions of phrasal verbs are divided into Idiomatic meanings ((Rushdi-Saleh et al., 2011) and Non-idiomatic meanings (Cappelle, Shtyrov, and Pulvermüller, 2010). For Syntactic functions, Depending on the presence of phrasal verbs, the usage of the affixes and modifiers surrounding the verb center will also change The double structure of the phrasal verb center is a feature that exists in most languages of the world. Parallel existence of phrasal verbs, in which the preceding verb denotes state (modus) and the verb after the dictum shows that it is impossible to define the secondary main relationship between the verbs and the particles.

2.4. Reasons for using phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are one of the most frequent multi-word units in English language. Phrasal verbs play a particularly important role in everyday communication. Accordingly, instead of just using learned words to speak or write, they often replace them with phrasal verbs with similar meanings. It is very normal for native speakers to use phrasal verbs because they are familiar with and understand the meaning of those multi-word units (Trebits, 2009). With the use of phrasal verbs, students can use a variety of expressions to express their desires with their diverse linguistic knowledge. For example, it can be said that (LOI English, 2021; 7ESL (2021):

E.g.: He made up this story. (He made this up) or He made this story up.

But it cannot be used: He made up it.

E.g.: We always respect our teachers. (We always respect our teachers)

Student can use the verb look up to = respect

E.g.: We always look up to our teachers.

2.5. Previous studies

Many researchers have performed studies and literature reviews on phrasal verbs. Zubir, Ghazali, & Ridzuan (2011) conducted a study at a high school in Malaysia exploring the two choices of students between phrasal verb and single-word choice in academic writing. The results show that students have preferences to use both phrasal verb and single word in academic writing. However, students also indicate that they often avoid the use of unfamiliar phrasal verbs as well as polysemy phrasal verbs. At the same time, study by Jahedi, & Mukundan, (2015) focuses on the analysis of phrasal verbs used by Chinese students concerning different levels of language skills from intermediate levels to advanced levels. , it shows phrasal verbs is less likely to be preferable by intermediate and advanced Chinese students where they pay more attention to semantic nature of phrasal verbs. However, the raising question on the result of this study is on the size of the experiment.

In Viet Nam, Tran, Huynh and Duong (2015) examined the teaching and using of phrasal verbs with the use of conceptual metaphor at Tra Vinh University. it is affirmed that the conceptual metaphor is being more effective to teach phrasal verbs in academic context in comparison to the use of traditional method. However, this study has not drawn the attention toward the functionality of semantic and syntactic aspects of phrasal verbs in regard to the context of academic writing. Tran and Tran (2019) conduct a study focusing on the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by ESL/EFL students. The results indicate students to have more tentative attempt to avoid the use of phrasal verb in their academic writing where they often did not use the most 100 common phrasal verbs listed in BNC by Gardner and Davies (2007). At the same time, students in this study tend to use different subcategories in respect to both semantic functions and syntactic functions. At the same time, transitive and inseparable phrasal verbs are more commonly referable in students' proposal with semi-idiomatic and fully idiomatic meanings

3. Methodology

3.1. Research method

This study employed qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing produced by English-majored students at a university in Binh Duong. The former is for analyzing the frequency of phrasal verbs, while the latter is for scrutinizing the functions of the examined phrasal verbs by English majored students and investigate the reasons underlying the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing.

3.2. Research participants

Fifty English majored students from a university in Binh Duong were conveniently sampled. The reason for selecting English-majored students is to ensure that all the participants had a moderately high level of English proficiency based on results of their B.A. entrance exams (English language proficiency tests). Furthermore, the corpus consisting of academic writing of English-majored students in English Applied Linguistics show the relatively equal level of the use of English among English-majored students. Students do not have the conditions to practice skills such as listening and speaking because there is no practice room. The knowledge in the textbook is old, not edited. The curriculum is too heavy on grammar, turning them into a "walking grammar book"

3.3. Research instruments

To conduct this research, the Research instruments used include: Essays and Semi-structured interview. First, for Essays. This corpus-based research mainly concentrates on investigating the use of phrasal verbs in 150 different academic essays. Furthermore, the study is an attempt to find out the functions of the phrasal verbs used in 150 academic essays in terms of syntax and semantics. Through the support of the department, the research can collect the writing directly from the database source of the university for the period from 1st June 2020 to 30th December 2020. These database source include all exercise and test writing essay from selected course of Academic Reading and Writing at the university. Second, for Semi-structured interview, Twenty students were invited for interviews which were conducted in Vietnamese to make sure that students did not have any difficulties in responding the interview questions. Each interview lasted 30 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with interviewees' permission for later analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

First, For Essay analysis. The analysis tool uses AntConc, the basic principle of which is to compare the words in a certain text with a certain vocabulary, by observing which words appear or do not appear in the vocabulary and the words that appear in the vocabulary ratio, researchers can know the wording situation of the text (Anthony, 2004).

Table: Framework for essay analysis

Theory	Category	Examples
Akbari (2009)	Transparent phrasal verbs	*send back, sat down, take out*
	Idiomatic phrasal verbs	*Carry out, give up, go off*
	Aspectual phrasal verbs	*Use up, fill up, play on*

Secondly, for Semi-structured interview. The content analysis approach was employed for interview data analysis.

4. Results and discussion

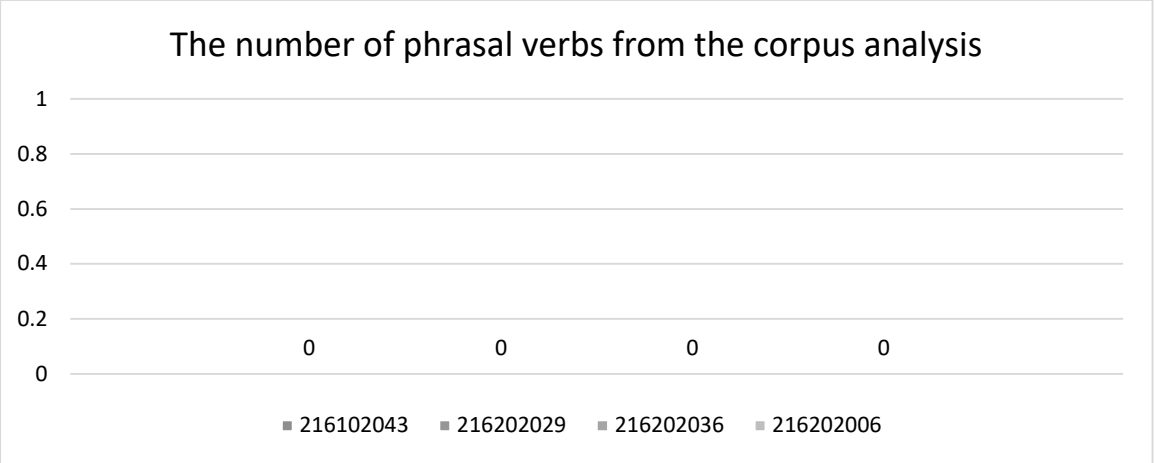
4.1. Results

4.1.1. Types and frequency of phrasal verbs used in essays by English majored students

As can be seen in figure 1 from the analysis of corpus transcript, Descriptive essay accounted for the highest frequency of phrasal verbs with 513 (0.28%), followed by Argumentative essay with 359 occurrences of phrasal verbs (0.24%) and Expository essay with 167 occurrences of phrasal verbs (0.21%). The number of phrasal verbs in Narrative essay was the lowest with 70 (0.21%). Similarly, when it comes to the comparison of the number of phrasal verbs in the 4 categories, Descriptive essay ranked first with 103 phrasal verbs, followed by Argumentative essay (59) and Expository essay (40). The lowest frequency of phrasal

verbs was Narrative essay (17). This means that students preferred to use phrasal verbs in the descriptive essays rather than in other types of essays.

***Figure 1**: The number of phrasal verbs from the corpus analysis*



Ten most commonly used phrasal verbs were listed as follows. As can be seen in Table 1, FIND OUT ranked first with 69 times of occurrences, accounting for 17.9 % of phrasal verbs used in 19 writings by Vietnamese English-majored students. BASE ON, REFER TO and TURN OUT accounted for 59, 51 and 45 of occurrences, making up to 15.3 %, 13.2% and 11.6 % respectively. The next phrasal verbs of the 10 most common phrasal verbs list in the English-majored writings triggered by SET UP and TAKE ON with the same number (34) and percentage (8.8%). CONSIST OF, which accounts for 30 occurrences, signals up to 7.8 %. Making up of 5.7 % and 5.4 % respectively, DEPENDING ON and POINT OUT ranked eighth and ninth respectively in the list. The least used phrasal verb in the top ten list is CONTRIBUTE TO with 20 occurrences, accounting for only 5.2 %. The number of top ten used phrasal verbs was more than half of all phrasal verbs used in English-majored writings, making up of 62.5%. In comparison with the most frequent adverbial particles and lexical verbs in phrasal verbs through gathering the data from BNC which were conducted using 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC) by Gardner and Davies (2007), the results from this study showed that only 2 phrasal verbs (CARRY OUT and POINT OUT) appeared in the frequency and coverage of top 100 Phrasal Verb Lemmas in BNC by Gardner and Davies (2007).

Type	Numbers	%
FIND OUT	69	17.9%
BASE ON	59	15.3%
REFER TO	51	13.2%
TURN OUT	45	11.6%
SET UP	34	8.8%
TAKE ON	34	8.8%
CONSIST OF	30	7.8%
DEPENDING ON	22	5.7%
POINT OUT	21	5.4%
CONTRIBUTE TO	20	5.2%

***Table 1:** Top 10 phrasal verbs in academic writing*

Below are some examples collected from the students essays for analysis

Transitivity

Example – Descriptive essay

"It favors butterflies and moths for its meals, but will happily **take any insect on** offer. Indeed, it need not even be an insect: particularly voracious orchid mantises have been known to feed on small lizards, frogs, mice and even birds." (M1)

Intransitivity

Example – Expository essay

"Harry won't **join in** with Draco's put-down and even refuses to shake his hand. Harry is the kind of person who **stands up** for people, while Draco tears them down. But even though Harry and Draco are early enemies, their character traits can be quite similar, too" (M13).

Separability

Example – Expository essay

"Harry doesn't respond to Draco's comment. Even though Harry is from an "old wizarding family" like Draco's, he is one of those people who had not **heard of** Hogwarts because of his Muggle upbringing. Draco's negative opinion about families he believes to be "lower" than his family creates his first **conflict with** Harry" (M9).

Inseparability

Example – Expository essay

"In 1917, Germany tried to coerce Mexico to **declare war against** America, leading President Woodrow Wilson to finally **bring the United States into** the strife" (M26).

4.1.2. The underlying reasons for using phrasal verbs used in essays by English majored students

The results from interviews have unraveled that English majored students employed phrasal verbs in their essays because of (1) easy structure and syntactic functions, (2) easier to understand the context, and (3) more interesting word choice in the essay.

a. Easy structure and syntactic functions to use in writing

Interviewed students indicated that:

"Sometimes, it is difficult to understand the meaning of phrasal verbs. Before looking them up in a dictionary, it would be helpful to use the context to understand them" (S2)

"The trick is that every phrasal verb has a distinct meaning, similar to idioms - it's a combination that has a particular meaning, one that you have to learn." (S1)

From the point of view of the scoring standards of the composition, whether it is academic writing or informal writing, or postgraduate entrance examination, it is mentioned that:

"The language is natural and smooth, and the vocabulary is rich" (S3)

"And the rich vocabulary includes the use of formal verb phrases" (S2).

Additionally, from the above results, it is noticed that To hang out, to go over, to all back, to work out, to look somebody up and so on are all verb phrases.

b. Easier to understand the context

Although phrasal verbs are acceptable in spoken English, they are often considered too informal in students' paper writing. In addition, phrasal verbs usually have multiple meanings. Their goal is to write the thesis in a concise language to make the work clear and concise. Therefore, it is recommended to replace phrasal verbs with formal words.

According to the interviews, the students S1 and S2 agree that:

"Academic writing often uses long words that are difficult to understand and a large number of professional terms, which makes readers feel "tall". However, this is a misunderstanding".

"Readers mistakenly think that the longer and rarer the word that I used, the more "supple" and the higher the quality of the paper. Short sentences and simple words can also make their papers better".

c. More interesting word choice in the essay

For most of interviewed students, they confirmed that:

"Some complex and advanced words may make their papers interesting or make our papers less readable, which defeats the purpose of academic writing (as clear and concise as possible, use appropriate words to express your argument)" (S1).

To avoid this, interviewed students explained that they used conjunctions or transitional words to guide students' argument, which can help them clarify their point and present certain information to the reader. These conjunctions can help them organize their thoughts from the overall structure and help readers understand their thoughts.

On the other side, most students thank those phrasal verbs are more common in spoken language. However, it is less formal than its corresponding single verb. In formal writing, authors often prefer to use single verbs, such as examine and design, rather than phrasal verbs, such as look at and come up with.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. The use of phrasal verbs used in academic writing by English majored students, including types, frequency and functions.

The frequencies of phrasal verbs were distinctive in the 5 categories. Moreover, participants of this study tended to use more phrasal verbs in Descriptive essay, whose frequency is approximately two-third phrasal verbs of Argumentative essay, ranking second in Table 1 and 23 times higher than Narrative essay and Critical essay.

As analyzed above, the structure of an English verb phrase consists of two components, the auxiliary element and the last central element. The structure of a Vietnamese verb phrase in its full form always has three components: the preceding sub-element, the central element and the latter sub-element. Formal English is mainly used in writing. This stylistic format usually has an academic writing tone and is usually found in academic textbooks, university papers, business letters and contracts.

In short, it can be stated that there are some similarities as well as differences. The most prominent similarity is the dominant use of elaborative phrasal verbs by academic writing students. Meanwhile, the most considerable difference is the relationship between characteristics and the frequency of phrasal verbs used.

In this study, it is found that there is a limited number of academic phrasal verbs used in 150 essay writings. It can be concluded that due to the complexity in the semantic and syntactic functions of phrasal verbs, students have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs in their essay writing.

4.2.2. The underlying reasons for the use of phrasal verbs in academic writing by English majored students

According to a lot of studies in academic writing, phrasal verbs should be avoided as much as possible, because they may have different meanings in different contexts and are not concise enough. However, the use of phrasal verbs are still popular with students due to the following underlying reasons:

Easy structure and syntactic functions to use in writing

Easier to understand the context

More interesting word choice in the essay

Results of this study revealed that academic writing used more phrasal verbs in their essays than non-academic writing ones. Specifically, they used 877 phrasal verbs while non-academic writing used 865 phrasal verbs. However, the difference in terms of frequencies of phrasal verbs was not significant. The results in these researchers all revealed that non-academic writing used more phrasal verbs than academic writing. Regarding sub-classes of phrasal verbs, it was showed that Vietnamese non-academic writing used more sub-classes in their essays than academic writing ones, 38 in compared with 35. Once again, it was obvious that the difference as regards the frequencies and sub-classes of phrasal verbs were not significant.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that the total number of phrasal verbs used in English essays was rather low. Instead, the students used more one-word verbs, which means they have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs in their B.A. English essays. On the basics of these findings, some implications may be suggested for Vietnamese EFL teachers, learners, and students. Culture shapes a language. It is an important element to well represent historical and social changes and events. Common English phrases often denote cultural images. Every English phrase is due to some cultural phenomenon. In the pedagogical context, teachers ought to raise awareness of learners about how to use Phrasal verbs adequately in appropriate context. For students, it is essential for them to have an awareness of how to take all advantages of forms and functions of Phrasal verbs.

A limitation of this study is that the quite small size of the data used for analysis. With the number of 150 essays, the data is, obviously, not large enough. A small-scale study may signify that the findings are not conclusive and may lead to the restriction of quantitative analysis. Another limitation is that this study only focuses on investigating frequencies, sentence position, syntactic categories, and functions of Phrasal verbs in order to explore the differences between the Phrasal verbs usage of Vietnamese students.

Therefore, further work needs to be done in order to achieve more explorations of phrasal verbs in the context of Vietnam. In addition, more research is needed to achieve a more insight into how phrasal verbs have been used by Vietnamese students in various genres of discourse. Accordingly, there is a hope that findings from such kinds of research might contribute to literature of English linguistics in general and the sub-field of language and gender in particular.

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