

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DEFINING PHRASAL VERBS

As previously mentioned, there has been substantial research and there is various literature available in the area of phrasal verbs, notably in the field of ESL and EFL. The verb plus particle combination functioning as a single unit is commonly termed as “a phrasal verb”. Some linguists call such combination “a multi-word verb” (Schmitt & Siyanova, 2007) and “a verb-particle combination” (Fraser, 1976). In the literature, various definitions of a phrasal verb are also found.

According to a definition provided by Fraser (1976), a verb-particle combination is used to describe “a single constituent or series of constituents, whose semantic interpretation is independent of the formatives which compose it” (p. v). That is, the meaning of a verb-particle combination cannot be decoded by combining the meanings of its verb and particle.

Bolinger (1971) suggests that the phrasal verbs should be considered as “new stereotypes” rather than “new words”. He proposes the phrasal verb as “a lexical unit in the strict sense of a non-additive compound or derivation, one that has a set meaning which is not the sum of the meanings of its parts” (p. xii).

In Darwin and Gray’s article (1999, p. 65), PVs can be defined as all verbs and particle combinations that function as a unit both lexically and syntactically such as “bring about”, “take on”, and “give up”.

Driven (2001) writes, according to a preliminary definition, that phrasal verbs “possess some degree of idiomaticity in the assembly of the verb plus preposition (cry over something), or verb plus separable particle (run up the flag, run the flag up), verb plus inseparable particle (run up a debt), or the double assembly of verb plus particle and preposition (face up to problems)” (p. 39).

For Fletcher and Patrick (2004), PV is a particular subset of verb-particle combinations which consist of a single-word verb and a particle, whether preposition or adverb. They further adopt the definition of a PV as it is in Dixon’s work (1987)

and describe them as “considered to be non-decomposable structures where the meaning is in the whole and not the parts of the phrase” (p. 163).

Schmitt and Siyanova (2007, p. 119) propose that multi-word verbs consist of two or more orthographic words acting as a single lexical unit whose meanings sometimes are quite easy to figure out from its separable parts (e.g. *get back* from a trip = return), while others cannot be virtually predictable (e.g. *brush up on your French* = revise).

A verb-particle is said to be very similar to a verb-preposition combination. However, they can be distinguished by the syntactic test. This is to say that a verb-particle combination has the property of being able to appear after the direct object. Following is the comparison of both syntactic patterns.

- i) He sped the process up.
 He sped *the pole up.
- ii) Harry will look the client over.
 Harry will look *the fence over.
- iii) The man reeled the line in.
 The man reeled *the street in. (Fraser, 1976, p. 2)

While a variety of definitions of the term PV have been suggested, it is obviously noticed that the PV is defined in two parts which are syntactic and lexical. Thus, this paper will use the definition proposed by Bolinger (1971) who saw the PV as a combination of verb and a particle, which can be either adverb or preposition, functioning together as a new lexical unit.

2.2 PHRASAL VERBS AS A PROBLEM FOR ESL/EFL LEARNERS

A considerable amount of literature has been published on phrasal verbs as a problematic feature for ESL/EFL learners. Conclusively, it has been suggested that not only the nature of phrasal verbs themselves, but also the teaching approaches used to present them to the learners, are the major causes of learners’ difficulty in dealing with phrasal verbs.

In *Helping students sort out phrasal verbs*, Blau, Gonzales, and Green (1983, p. 184) posit two categories of student's problems with phrasal verbs: semantic or vocabulary problems and syntactic or word order problems. In their view of the semantic problem, they highlight that students often do not consider the two- or three-word verb as a lexical unit with a special meaning. The claim is more precise when phrasal verbs do not occur in the student's mother tongue. Students also overlook the importance of the particle of the phrasal verbs, especially when a single word in their first language can convey the meaning. Consequently, it is not surprising that they skip the particle or the final component and produce sentences like: * Turn the stove. and * Pick the laundry, instead of: Turn on the stove. and Pick up the laundry (the sentences marked with an asterisk (*) are ungrammatical).

This view is also accepted by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). They mention that phrasal verbs are odd and troublesome for ESL/EFL learners as the existence of phrasal verbs in non-Germanic languages is very rare. As a result, some nonnative speakers often overuse single-word verbs where a phrasal verb is more appropriate. For example, they say, "I arose early this morning." instead of "I got up early this morning" (p. 425). Even though the former is grammatical and meaningful, the latter is more appropriate in spoken discourse.

Moreover, the meaning of many phrasal verbs is not transparent. Therefore, it is not easy, and sometimes impossible, to interpret the meaning of the verb by combining the meaning of each parts i.e. these phrasal verbs are said to be idiomatic, for example, chew out, tune out, catch up, and put off (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Schmitt & Siyanova, 2007; Side, 1990; Wyss, 2002).

In their analysis of the syntactic problem, Blau, Gonzales, and Green (1983) point out that the placement of objects in relation to the particle is able to create confusion to the students i.e. whether certain phrasal verbs are separable or non-separable. Sometimes teachers and textbooks overburden students in mastering phrasal verbs and mislead them that in order to avoid the errors they need to memorize the separable/non-separable property of every English phrasal verb. In addition, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 426) illustrate this point clearly by showing the condition of optional and obligatory separation of the transitive phrasal verb "turn out".

a. Turn out the lights.

b. Turn the lights out.

As the direct object is expressed as a noun, as illustrated in a. and b above, placing the noun object after or before the particle is syntactically possible. In other words, when the direct object is a noun, the separation is optional. On the other hand, as shown in c. and d. below, when the direct object is a pronoun, the separation is obligatory and it must necessarily be placed between the verb and particle.

c. Turn them out.

d. *Turn out them.

Furthermore, phrasal verbs are said to be problematic to ESL/EFL learners as a result of their highly productive capacity (Bolinger, 1971; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Cornell, 1985; Darwin & Gray, 1999; Side, 1990). As Bolinger (1971, p. xiii) states the phrasal verb is “probably the most prolific source” of new words in English.

Superficially, phrasal verbs might seem to be randomly invented from the choice and combination of verbs and particles and thus there are a large number of phrasal verbs which learners need to know. However, Cornell (1985, p. 270) argues that, in general non-idiomatic phrasal verbs can be found in large quantities. Learners can thus deduce the meaning of phrasal verbs if the verb element is known. For instance, if the learner knows the verb *to rush* or *to steam*, s/he can easily understand the meaning of *to rush away* or *to steam off*.

However, again, as Cornell (1985, p. 270) reminds us, dealing with phrasal verbs turns out to be problematic owing to the phenomenon of polysemy. He further describes that a combination of a particular verb and particle may be polysemic in having both an idiomatic and a non-idiomatic use as well as having more than one idiomatic use. Illustrated below, an idiomatic phrasal verb *put up* can be used in different meanings:

He put us up for the night.

Who put you up to this?

He put up a good fight.

Elsewhere, another example of a phrasal verb having more than one meaning is provided by Steele (2005, p. 1). The phrasal verb *turn down* carries the familiar meaning *to decrease the volume* as in “He turned down the radio,” but it can be interpreted as *to reject* as in “He turned her down”. In addition, to reduce students’ confusion, she suggests that teachers should teach the meaning of the verb as it appears saliently in the text, without giving the other possible meanings.

In addition, a further complicated problem may arise from what native speakers of English know unconsciously about phrasal verbs, i.e. they understand the underlying meaning and the use of particles. This allows them to coin novel phrasal verbs and understand phrasal verbs they have never encountered before (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Darwin and Gray, 1999; Marks, 2005). By way of illustration, Side (1990) explains that “If I tell somebody to *bog off*, that person is well aware that what I am saying has nothing to do with bogs and everything to do with beating a retreat” (p. 146). However, such understanding cannot be expected from ESL/EFL learners. Thus, they can be confused when being told to *bog off* (Darwin & Gray, 1999, p. 66).

2.3 RELEVANT RESEARCH

It is generally admitted that phrasal verbs are considered to be one of the problematic features for ESL and EFL learners. Avoidance strategy is thus employed by ESL and EFL learners when they perceive that a target language word or structure is difficult to produce.

Many researchers have attempted to investigate the avoidance of phrasal verbs among ESL and EFL learners (For example, Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, as cited in Liao & Fukuya, 2002; Liao & Fukuya, 2002; Schmitt & Siyanova, 2007).

The first study was conducted by Dagut and Laufer in 1985 (as cited in Liao & Fukuya, 2002, p. 74). They examined the performance of Israeli learners of English on phrasal verbs, a lexicosyntactic form with no formal equivalent in Hebrew. The subjects who were intermediate Hebrew learners were divided into three groups and took three tests; a multiple-choice test, a verb translation test, and a verb

memorization test. Moreover, the study investigated the frequency of avoidance in three phrasal verb types termed as literal, figurative, and completive. The findings of this study showed that the majority of intermediate Hebrew learners avoided using phrasal verbs and preferred one-word verbs. In addition, avoidance was most frequent in figurative phrasal verbs. They concluded that the avoidance of phrasal verbs in Hebrew learners was a result of the first language and target language structural differences.

Following the work of Dagut and Laufer in 1985, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) as cited in Liao & Fukuya (2002, p. 75), hypothesized that Dutch ESL learners would tend not to avoid English phrasal verbs because phrasal verbs also existed in their mother tongue. Moreover, they hypothesized that if Dutch ESL learners would avoid phrasal verbs, it was for semantic reasons, not for structural reasons, as Hebrew learners did. Furthermore, in order to examine whether the avoidance behavior, if any, would diminish with increasing proficiency, the participants were divided into intermediate and advanced level. From the findings, contrary to the hypothesis, Dutch learners did not avoid phrasal verbs, whether they were intermediate or advanced level. Interestingly, although Dutch learners did not avoid phrasal verbs categorically, they avoided those idiomatic phrasal verbs that they perceived as too Dutch-like. Therefore, similarities between first and second language can be possible causes for avoidance. It was also found that Dutch learners had “a tendency to adopt a play-it-safe strategy, preferring one-word verbs with general, multi-purpose meanings to phrasal verbs with specific, sometimes idiomatic meanings” (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p. 241, cited in Liao & Fukuya, 2002, p. 76).

The next study on avoidance of phrasal verbs was done by Laufer and Eliasson (1993, cited in Liao and Fukuya, 2002, p.76-77). Based on previous studies, they identified three possibilities as causes of syntactic and lexical avoidance: (i) first and second language differences, (ii) first and second language similarities, and (iii) second language complexity. Advanced Swedish learners of English, whose first language had the phrasal verbs, participated in this study. A multiple-choice test and a translation test were used in this study. From the results, it was found that i) phrasal verbs were avoided by learners whose first language lacked such a grammatical category like Hebrew, but were not avoided by those who phrasal verbs exist in their

native language like Swedish; ii) inherent complexity did not play an important role in second language avoidance; and iii) idiomatic meaning similarity between first language and second language did not necessarily induce learner's avoidance. Laufer and Eliasson (1993 cited in Liao & Fukuya, 2002, p. 77), therefore, attributed the avoidance strategy to the differences between first and second language.

Liao and Fukuya (2002) further studied the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners in relation to their proficiency levels (advanced and intermediate), phrasal verbs types (figurative and literal), as well as test types (multiple-choice, translation and recall). This study was conducted in two stages. Firstly, fifteen (15) native speakers took the multiple-choice test so that 15 cases of native-speaker preference for a phrasal verb over one-word equivalent in a short dialogue could be identified. This study also looked at the phrasal verbs in two types which are literal and figurative, in order to investigate whether the semantic complexity played a role in learner's avoidance of phrasal verbs. The next stage was to find out whether and to what extent these phrasal verbs would be avoided by Chinese learners of English. The participants were then divided into three independent groups of advanced learners and three independent groups of intermediate learners. Each of the six groups took one of the three tests which were a multiple-choice test, a verb translation, and a recall test. The results showed that the intermediate learners, whose first language lacked the phrasal verb structure, have a tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs and preferred one-word equivalents. Moreover, it was not only intermediate but advanced learners tended to produce less figurative than literal phrasal verbs in the translation test. This study finally claimed that learners' phrasal verb avoidance could be a manifestation of learners' interlanguage development rather than the first and second language differences or similarities.

Recently, Schmitt and Siyanova (2007) further explored the avoidance of phrasal verbs in a number of perspectives. This study examined the relative frequencies of multi-word vs. one-word verbs in written and spoken English as first language, compared the likelihood of using multi-word vs. one-word verbs by both native speakers and advanced nonnative in spoken and written contexts, and investigated whether exposure to second language environment affected the use of phrasal verbs. The participants in this study were 65 native speakers, and 65

nonnative speakers whose English proficiency was advanced and first languages were non-Germanic e.g. Arabic, Russian, Italian, and Chinese. Differently from the previous studies, participants, both native and nonnative, were asked to judge how likely they were to use multi-word verbs and one-word verb pairs in a contextualized situation, ranking from “very unlikely” to “very likely”. The results showed that nonnative were less likely to use multi-word verbs than native speakers in informal spoken contexts. In addition, the amount of exposure to native-speaking environments did not affect the likelihood of using the multi-word verbs. However, a corpus analysis of the same verb pairs showed that the one-word verbs are often more frequent in both written and spoken discourse.

Unfortunately, after surveying the current research, no research has been conducted to investigate the avoidance of phrasal verbs among EFL learners in Thailand. Therefore, this study explores this issue further by investigating the avoidance of phrasal verbs in spoken language among Thai EFL learners in relation to their proficiency level.