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**THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS**

**Campina Grande – PB  
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## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this work  
to all my family, for love,  
understanding, support, patience,  
and for the prayers on my favor  
during all my course.  
God bless you all!  
I love you!*

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Above all, I thank God, my Lord and my Savior, for his precious grace, and endless love. He is my shepherd, my guide and my protector, and has supplied each of my needs. To Him all honor, all praise and glory, forever and ever. Amen!

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## ABSTRACT

Studying a foreign language is not an easy task. Due to the English language status in the globalization context, the study of this language has been required worldwide. Based on the vocabulary line of investigation within the area of teaching English as a Foreign Language or as a Second Language (EFL/ESL), this bibliographical research focuses on Phrasal Verbs teaching and learning, added to the theories of relevant scholars as Nunan (1998) and Carter (1998), among others. Phrasal Verbs are idiomatic expressions that refer to Germanic languages, especially to the English one, and play a role of fundamental importance to development of an oral communication in English. In reason to their complexity, Phrasal Verbs can be considered a stumbling block to learners' awareness, once they are omnipresent in the English language not only in informal conversation, fiction and news, but also in academic prose as well. This article discusses the reasons why EFL/ESL students face so many difficulties in English Phrasal Verbs learning and use, in the context of the classroom. The main problems found are related to structural, morphological, phonological and syntactic aspects, but mainly to semantic ones. Some teaching alternatives are proposed, in order to help EFL/ESL learners, whereas a way of learning the English Phrasal Verbs is not found in books.

**Key-words:** Teaching and Learning. EFL/ESL learners. Phrasal Verbs. Difficulties.

## RESUMO

Estudar uma língua estrangeira não é tarefa fácil. Devido ao *status* da língua inglesa no contexto do mundo globalizado, seu estudo tem sido exigido em todo o mundo. Baseada na linha de pesquisa de vocabulário, na área de ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira ou como segunda língua, esta pesquisa bibliográfica foca no ensino e aprendizado de verbos frasais, adicionada às teorias de relevantes estudiosos como Nunan (1998) e Carter (1998), entre outros. Os verbos frasais são expressões idiomáticas que se referem às línguas germânicas, principalmente à língua inglesa, e desempenham um papel de fundamental importância para o desenvolvimento de uma comunicação oral em inglês. Em razão da sua complexidade, os verbos frasais podem ser considerados um obstáculo à consciência dos aprendizes, uma vez que são onipresentes na língua inglesa não somente na conversa informal, como na ficção e nas notícias, como também na prosa acadêmica. Este artigo discute as razões pelas quais os estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira e como segunda língua enfrentam tantas dificuldades no aprendizado e uso dos verbos frasais em inglês, no contexto da sala de aula. Os principais problemas encontrados estão relacionados a aspectos estruturais, morfológicos, fonológicos e sintáticos, mas principalmente a aspectos semânticos. Algumas alternativas de ensino são propostas, a fim de ajudar os aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira ou segunda língua, visto que nos livros não se encontra uma maneira de aprender os verbos frasais em inglês.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino e aprendizagem. Aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira e como segunda língua. Verbos frasais. Dificuldades.



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## INTRODUCTION

Communication is an intrinsic characteristic of the human beings, and the main form of communication among people is doubtless the language. Since the episode of the Tower of Babel, described in the Holy Bible, a great number of languages began to be spoken in the worldwide; and social, economic, commercial, diplomatic and military reasons have led people from different countries and languages to get in touch with one another. According to Puren (1988, *apud* CESTARO, s.d.), during the middle ages, in Europe, Latin language was considered the language of the church, business, international relationships, and philosophical, literary and scientific publications. Nowadays with the phenomenon of globalization, the English language has played a relevant role in the world's communication, having become the lingua franca. Thus, the interest on this language knowledge has increased worldwide, since it provides not only the exchanging of information, but cultural, scientific and technological development, opening doors to the professional market.

But, learning a foreign language, as English, for example, is not an easy task. In this sense, learners face many difficulties in their learning process. Phrasal Verbs (PVs), a very delicate linguistic item for those whose native language does not have this kind of structure, can represent one of these difficulties and is the focus of this research. The theoretical framework is based on the theories of Al-Sibaí (2003), Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), Chen (2007), Siders (2007), Delta (2008), Liao and Fukuya (2006), Waibel (2007), Nunan (1998), and Cater (1998).

The motivation for this research was due to the fact that, during all my experience with the English language study, since the very beginning until starting my second undergraduation course, I have never learnt about PVs. In the same way, in my praxis as an English teacher, dealing with EFL intermediate level learners, I perceived that the students also did not know or did not use accurately PVs, an item of fundamental importance to develop an oral communication in English. These reasons have, therefore, inspired me to find out what makes learners face difficulties in learning PVs.

This is a bibliographical research. According to Marconi and Lakatos (2001), and Gil (2008), a bibliographical research is the methodological work based on the lifting and selection of literature ever published on a topic that is being researched, especially books and encyclopedias, followed by magazines, articles, thesis, dissertations, monographs, etc. This material gives the theoretical support to the scientific work, allowing the researcher the

access, indirectly and at the same time, to a wide range of phenomenon, making possible “collecting knowledge, available in the area, identifying the theories produced, analyzing them and evaluating their contribution to understand or explain the issue of the research object” (MALHEIROS, 2010. p. 2).<sup>1</sup> The objective of this work is to discuss the main difficulties EFL/ESL learners face in the learning and use of Phrasal Verbs, in the classroom context, seeking to propose some alternatives for teaching them. The work is divided into five parts: 1.Vocabulary Teaching and Learning; 2. Defining Phrasal Verbs; 3.Learners’ Difficulties, subdivided into Syntactic, Semantic, and Pragmatic Aspects of Phrasal Verbs; 4. The Teaching of Phrasal Verbs; and 5. Chinese Learners’ Difficulties: A Case Study, subdivided into Reasons EFL Learners Avoid the use of Phrasal Verbs in English, and Pedagogical Implications to Phrasal Verbs Learning. Then, the final remarks are presented.

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<sup>1</sup> levanta o conhecimento disponível na área, identificando as teorias produzidas, analisando-as e avaliando sua contribuição para compreender ou explicar o problema objeto da investigação.

## 1 VOCABULARY TEACHING AND LEARNING

For years and years the teaching of vocabulary has been a neglected aspect in the EFL classroom, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, under the strong use of audio-lingualism as a teaching method. This method suggests that the focus of language teaching should be on the acquisition of language structure, ignoring that an extensive vocabulary plays a fundamental importance for successful second language use. There was a belief that once learners acquired grammatical patterns of the language, they would be able to build a large vocabulary later (NUNAN, 1998). This negligence might have happened due to three reasons: firstly, a linguistic research on syntax and phonology may have considered vocabulary a less important element in learning a second language; secondly, due to its finite relations, there is the possibility of a significant structural description and generalization within syntax, in contrary to lexis, where relations are theoretically infinite; and third, to specify the syntactic structures to be learned in a syllabus design is much easier than comparing to vocabulary items which may be required (CARTER, 1998).

From the late 1970s on, however, “there has been a revival of interest in vocabulary teaching” (CARTER, 1998, p.185). Since then, the status of vocabulary in the curriculum has been substantially enhanced. Important contributions to this increasing area were the development of communicative approaches to the language teaching, and the stimulus of comprehension-based methods such as the Natural Approach (KRASHEN and TERREL 1983, *apud* NUNAN, 1998). Proponents of these methods advocate that, once learners in the early stages of learning and using a second language are better served by vocabulary than grammar, they can ignore grammar in seeking for meaning if they have a reasonable vocabulary base (NUNAN, 1998).

But, what would be the effective way of acquiring a minimum adequate vocabulary, which is fundamental for successful communication in a second language? Studies have shown that one of the devices used for English vocabulary learning has been the use of lists of words. These lists, containing 2 to 3,000 words, are based on frequency counts drawn for a corpus of 2 to 5 million words. It is claimed that once knowing them, learners have access to about 80 per cent of the words in a written text (CARTER, 1998). Such lists “assume that teaching learners the words they are most likely to encounter frequently is the most effective way of building a functional vocabulary” (NUNAN, 1998, p. 118).

Some researchers, however, criticize that method. Carter (1998) considers that word lists are not necessarily relevant to the learners needs. For them, more important than

frequency is the context in which language is inserted. This learning model “involves the learner in seeking clues to meaning by following a number of defined steps which lead from the form of the word itself, to its immediate context, and then to its operation in the surrounding context” (CARTER, 1998, p. 210). In accordance to Carter’s viewpoint (1998), Nunan (1998) points out that,

if we assume that language is also best encountered and learned in context, then this has particular implications for practice. In the first place, it would argue against the learning of lists of decontextualised vocabulary items. Rather, the focus in class will be on encouraging learners to develop strategies for inferring the meaning of new words from the context in which they occur, and teaching them to use a range of cues, both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. pictures and diagrams in written texts) do determine meaning (NUNAN, 1998, p. 121).

Nevertheless, inferring the meaning of unknown words within a text is not always an easy task. This occurs due the fact that, in some cases, the meaning is not deducible from contextual clues. For example, in the sentence “A Japanese engineer *took over* the company”, it is very difficult to infer that “take over” means “to assume control”. A very important and powerful analytical tool available to provide learners in such situations of learning is the dictionary. In the extract below, Nunan (1998) shows that the dictionary helps its users

not only finding meanings and checking spellings, but also for gaining insights into the grammatical aspects of the item in question. The dictionary can also overcome one of the limitations of contextual exercises, in that, in contrast to the context bound meaning of the word (which may be idiosyncratic or peripheral to its core meaning), the dictionary presents the prototypical meanings of the word. Also the activity of matching the dictionary definition of the word to its use in the context helps to create deeper links within the student’s mind (NUNAN, 1998, p. 127).

Within vocabulary learning, the vocabulary development is the aspect that has called researchers’ attention in the second language acquisition. Researchers as Nunan (1998) and Carter (1998) reveal that this topic has been limited to the areas of morphology, syntax and phonology, rather than pragmatic, strategic and lexical competence (NUNAN, 1998). As said by Carter, “knowing a word in a language means to know *both* its syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. To know a word is also to know it in a context. Syntactic and semantic knowledge must also include pragmatic knowledge” (CARTER, 1998, p.191). Carter (*op. cit.*) also mentions that knowing a word means knowing:

how to use it productively and having the ability to recall it for active use; [...] the likelihood of encountering the word in either spoken and written context or in both;

[...] the syntactic frames into which the word can be slotted and the underlying forms and derivations which can be made from it; [...] the relations it contracts with other words in the language and with related words in an L1 as well; [...] perceiving the relative coreness of the word as well as its more marked pragmatic and discursal functions and its style-levels; [...] the different meanings associated with it and, often in a connected way, the range of its collocational patterns; [...] knowing words as part of or wholly as fixed expressions conveniently memorized to repeat – and adapt – as the occasion arises (CARTER, 1998, p. 239).

As said by Carter (1998), morphology, syntax, and phonology are important, but lexis plays a preponderant role in the process of a foreign language acquisition. If one has a good vocabulary, he or she will easily learn structure, but if one has a knowledge of structure but does not have, at least a basic vocabulary, the outcome will not be the same. The way of learning, whether through word lists, context or dictionary, may vary according to the situation or the means available to each one, but what is more important is to acquire the vocabulary. There is a lexical item considered as *sine qua non* to speak and understand the English language, especially into the context of oral or informal communication. This item is Phrasal Verbs (or multi-word verbs), which is going to be better explained in the next part.

## 2 DEFINING PHRASAL VERBS

Phrasal Verbs (PVs) or “multi-word verbs” (CELCE–MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999) have many definitions, and from grammars to grammars details can be added or omitted. These are some of the definitions found in the literature:

- 1) “Phrasal verb (PV) is made up of two (or more) parts that function as a single verb” (CELCE–MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 426);
- 2) “A phrasal verb consists of a verb in combination with a preposition or adverb or both...” (KOPROWSKI, 2005 *apud* CHEN, 2007, p. 1);
- 3) “...multi-word verbs constitute a syntactic or lexical unit functioning like a single lexical verb; they consist of a verb and one or two additional elements, generally called particles” (WAIBLE, 2007, p. 15);
- 4) “Phrasal verbs are two-part verbs comprising a verb and a particle (e.g., to look up). Sometimes they can be constructed with three parts, in that a preposition can follow the particle (e.g., keep up with)” (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1991, p. 23).

In other words, PVs are understood as a combination that consists of a verb plus a particle (preposition/adverb), forming a unit of meaning, which does not correspond to the verb and to the particle individually.

Many are the types of multi-word verbs. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) present three categories of them. They are:

a) Literal phrasal verbs – the ones that “function syntactically like verb-particle constructions”. For example: *sit down, stand up, hand out, take down, carry out, throw away, climb up, fall down, pass through*.

b) Aspectual phrasal verbs – one category “where the meaning is not as transparent, but it is not idiomatic either”. According to the authors, “this category consists of verbs to which certain particles contribute consistent aspectual meaning.” (*op. cit.*, p. 432). They can be subdivided into a number of semantic classes, depending on the semantic contribution of the particle, as following: (i) inceptive (to signal a beginning state) *take off, set out, start up*; (ii) continuative (to show that the action continues) *run on, carry on, work away, travel around, think through*; (iii) iterative (use of *over* with activity verbs to show repetition) *do over, write over, think over*; (iv) completive (uses particles *up, out, off, and down* to show that the action is incomplete) *burn down, mix up, turn off, fade out, cut off, check over, catch up*.

c) Idiomatic phrasal verbs – those ones that “seems difficult, if not impossible, to figure out the meaning of the verb by combining the separate meanings of its parts.” Some examples of idiomatic phrasal verbs are: *chew out, tune out, catch up, put off, keep up with* (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 432-433).

Dagut and Laufer (1985 *apud* LIAO and FUKUYA, 2006, p. 74) classified Phrasal Verbs (PVs) in three types:

(a) literal—phrasal verbs whose meaning is a straightforward product of their semantic components: *go out, take away, come in*; (b) figurative—in which a new meaning has resulted from a metaphorical shift of meaning and the semantic fusion of the individual components: *turn up, let down, ...*; (c) completive—in which the particle describes the result of the action: *cut off, burn down,...*

Siders (2007), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Dagut and Laufer (1985 *apud* LIAO and FUKUYA, 2006) on the other hand, do not consider the idiomatic as phrasal verbs. According to him, idioms are a set of words with a unique meaning which has nothing to do with each part separately. They are a whole that cannot be modified, except the verb that can be conjugated into the present and past tenses. In his opinion, (*op cit.*, p. 5), PVs, in the strict sense of the term, can have numerous meanings, and “all of them have to do with the literal meaning of its constituents.”

However, it is important to highlight that PVs are an intrinsic characteristic of the spoken English and “no one can speak or understand English, at least the informal register,

without a knowledge of phrasal verbs” (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 424).

PVs are not merely a combination of a verb and a particle. They convey a whole grammatical complexity which causes serious difficulties to EFL learners, as we are going to describe in the following part.

### 3 LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES

One of the most important topics related to the vocabulary acquisition concerns to the learning and teaching of Phrasal verbs (PVs). Nevertheless, research worldwide has shown that ESL/EFL learners face difficulties to understand and use these multi-word verbs, specially in the context of oral communication. This occurs, on one hand, due to the fact that “there are very few non-Germanic languages that have phrasal verbs” (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 425), and on the other hand, to syntactic, semantic, morphological and phonological complexities. Waibel (2007), in a corpus-based study of German and Italian students, points out that

“Phrasal verbs are in fact a highly complex area of the English language in several aspects, and learners have to face a number of syntactic and semantic pitfalls which make these multi-word verbs very difficult to master. These difficulties apply both to the (passive) comprehension and (active) production” (WAIBEL 2007, p. 34).

Other studies carried out in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Taiwan (WYSS 2002; YOSHIDA, *s.d.*; YANG and HSIEH, *s.d.*) have revealed that PVs can be considered a “stumbling block” in the ESL/EFL learning and teaching, since they are omnipresent in the English language not only in informal conversation, fiction and news, but also in academic prose as well. The studies also showed that one of the main difficulties learners face is the metaphoric meaning of non-literal PVs, what make them complicated to be processed by the students. The indispensable role PVs play in communication, especially in oral forms, is something worrying for the learners, once that no one is able to speak or understand English, at least the informal register, without a knowledge of these multi-word verbs. (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999; ABOUT, 2007 *apud* CHEN, 2007, p. 348).

In Brazil, Nogueira and Santos (2004) say that one of the main difficulties faced by EFL students is the way most of grammar books approach this topic, emphasizing PVs formation and use in the phrase, focusing on transitivity and separability or not of them, rather



than on their meanings and the way of studying them properly. Another difficulty, they argue, is the fact that this kind of structure does not exist in the Portuguese language. The authors also point out that the difficulty with the teaching of PVs lies in the fact that their global meaning does not depend on the comprehension of each individual part of the expression. For example, if one knows the meaning of the verb “bring” and of the preposition “up”, not necessarily will infer that the meaning of “bring up” is “to educate a child”.

Therefore, encouraging ESL/EFL learners to learn, use, and master PVs in the English language is a challenge for the teachers. And the challenge seems to be so great that most teachers avoid teaching them, preferring to teach Latin words, with the same meaning. For example “establish” (Latin word), instead “set up” (PV); “realize” (Latin word), instead “find out”. Just to illustrate, in my experience with English language learning, since the very beginning, passing by high school up to my second undergraduation course, I have never learnt about PVs, for my teachers had never approached the subject in the classroom. I also do not remember if I have found anything about this lexical item in my course books. Only when I came to university I found out PVs existed, being a requirement of fundamental relevance for an effective communication, as well as a very difficult and complex field of the English language.

In my praxis as an English teacher, dealing with intermediate level classrooms, things have not been different: the students also do not know PVs. A clear demonstration of this gap can be observed in the mere reading of a text: learners tend to read verb and particle separately. There is not a need of too much effort to diagnose that the students do not know this content because they were never taught. This seems to be the reality of ESL/EFL learners in relation to PVs learning and teaching.

### 3.1 STUDENT’S LEVELS OF DIFFICULTIES

PVs seem to be a very complex field of research in the English language, according to the theories already mentioned in this work. For this reason, EFL learners have faced many learning difficulties in the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects, as described below.

### 3.1.1 Syntactic Aspects

There are several syntactic features of PVs, but studies (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999) focus mainly on matter of the transitivity and intransitivity, and the separability.

As PVs are a unit of meaning, and function like single-word verbs, according to the authors (*op. cit.*) they can be divided into two subcategories: transitive and intransitive.

#### 3.1.1.1 Transitive

Transitive phrasal verbs require an element to complete their meaning. To this element or complement, we call “object”. For example:

PV                      OBJECT

*I'm **looking for** my glasses.*

#### 3.1.1.2 Intransitive

Intransitive phrasal verbs have a complete meaning in themselves, and do not require an object. For instance:

PV

*My car **broke down**.*

#### 3.1.1.3 Separability

Some transitive phrasal verbs can be separable. This separation consists of putting the direct object between the verb and the particle. For example:

PV    OBJECT    PV    PV    OBJECT

***Put** your jacket **on** (**Put on** your jacket).*

However, if the direct object is a pronoun, it necessarily has to be separated. For example:

PV    OBJECT    PV                                      PV    OBJECT

***Put** it **on**,            instead **Put on** it (not grammatical).*

In the case of PVs, the biggest problem related to syntactic tends to be the separability, that is, to the way they can be separated. The learners confuse when they can separate the terms or not, and the learning becomes frustrating for them. For example, in the sentence *he called off the meeting*, mostly, the learners are not able to recognize that the verb *call* is a transitive one, and that *the meeting* is a direct object. Consequently, they do not know if they can separate the verb from the particle or not.

### 3.1.2 Semantic Aspects

The main difficulty faced by ESL/EFL on PVs learning seems to be in terms of meaning. Here we present three reasons that lead learners not to understand PVs meanings. Initially, many PV have both idiomatic and non-idiomatic meanings, and

since there is no logic involved when it comes to deciphering the meaning of idioms, their mastery requires foreign language students either to draw on their imagination (many idioms are very pictorial or metaphorical) or to learn them by heart. (WAIBLE, 2007, p. 36).

Secondly, a single PV may have more than one meaning, what increases the difficulties of learning them. For example, the phrasal verb *take out* can have the following uses: (1) Drew money: He *took out* ten dollars; (2) Pull tooth: He had two teeth *taken out* last week; (3) Lend a book: She *took me out* a nice book; (4) Invite someone to dance: He *took out* a girl to dance in the party; (5) Choose (goods): We *took out* some CDs to buy. This wide variety of meanings represent a serious problem to learning, once it can confuse the learners. One way to understand its functional meaning is to observe its use under its surrounded context, as explained by Carter (1998) and Nunan (1998).

The third reason concerns to productivity: "...the mere addition of an extra element [a particle] can equip a simplex verb with specialization and intensification" (WAIBLE, 2007, p.33). Thus, PVs have become a fertile field in the English language, and every day new PVs may be constructed easily by English native speakers, at the same time that there is no logical base on which the coining of these new terms can be explained. The extract below shows that

Phrasal Verbs are a highly productive lexical category in English. [...] However, we have no way of knowing in advance exactly which verb will join with which particle to form a new phrasal verb. Furthermore, there is also a certain unpredictability as to what the meaning of a new phrasal verb will be since many of them are noncompositional or idiomatic – their meanings are different from what combining the meaning of the verb with the meaning of the particle would lead you to expect. (CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN FREEMAN, 1999, p. 431).

### 3.1.3 Pragmatic Aspects of Phrasal Verbs

PVs are a particularity of Germanic languages, especially the English language. Native speakers are able to understand them without a need of studying forms or rules, once in the same way they "coin novel phrasal verbs, [they] can understand phrasal verbs that they never

before encountered because they understand the underlying logic of the language” (STAUFFER, 1996 *apud* CELCE-MURCIA and LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 433).

Siders (2007, p. 1) says that “The underlying system of English would be difficult to comprehend without them [PVs], and much of the rest of the language would be confusing and arbitrary until these items are learned.” There are cases in the English language for what PVs avoid the use of many words or phrases. The expression “check in”, for example, avoids the description of the whole process before a trip.

Phrasal Verbs are also commonly used in fiction and informal conversation. In news and academic writing, their use is relatively rare. Thus, the more formal a speech, the less PVs are used. Nevertheless, PVs have such a strength that they can be sometimes found in formal conversations.

According to my teaching *práxis*, beyond the aspects presented here, there is another crucial aspect in the EFL context: the books do not teach how to study and learn PVs. Grammars show forms, structures, how to use, give lists of the main and the most used ones, but it seems to be rare to find someone teaching one way of learning PVs. Do learners have to memorize long and long lists of phrasal verbs? Are there methods and approaches to teach phrasal verbs? Finally, what is the easiest way to teach these multi-word verbs?

#### 4 THE TEACHING OF PHRASAL VERBS

As we have seen, it is practically impossible to communicate in informal conversations in the English language without using the PVs. Due to their complexity, it is very challenging for EFL learners and teachers to teach and learn this English lexical item. According to Siders (2007), many English teachers in Mexico agree that PVs are only used by advanced learners. However, for the author (*op cit.*, p. 1), “We foreign language teachers do a great disservice to any student who we deprive of this knowledge [phrasal verbs] – doubly so because there are easy, excellent ways to present phrasal verbs from the very first week of classes!”

Thornbury (2002 *apud* DELTA, 2008, p. 5) criticizing the traditional approach for phrasal verbs teaching, suggests that “phrasal verbs are best learned on item-by-item basis, and preferably in short contexts that demonstrate their syntactic behavior, [and] should be acquired like the rest of the lexis by providing meaningful context, exposure, and recycling.”

Delta (2008), investigating PVs teaching to Saudi College students, based on a review of the literature, states that there is a wide evidence that the Balanced Activity Approach -

BAA (founded on the principles of semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis, and the teaching of PVs under the influence of texts and contexts) is an efficient system in teaching PVs to EFL students. He affirms that

the “Balanced Activity Approach” (BAA) promotes language input and practice under controlled conditions in order to increase teaching effectiveness and maximize language learning accuracy. It also emphasizes the importance of communicative activities in order to achieve communication efficiency inside and outside the classroom (DELTA, 2008, p 4).

According to the author, whereas BAA is currently at the forefront in teaching the complexities of PVs, and due the variety and adaptability in which it can be applied, it has been chosen as the chief vehicle of teaching PVs to Saudi college students.

Prabhu’s (1990, *apud* CHEN, 2007, p. 352) point of view is that “there are no best methods in education, particularly with respect to English phrasal verbs.” “However”, completes Chen (2007), “effective methods need to be explored in the Chinese context.”

Taking into consideration that each author has a different opinion about methods and approaches in the teaching of vocabulary, and each one talks about their experience with different students in different cultures and contexts, we may conclude that the best method is the one that satisfies the learners’ necessities. For this reason, teachers need to create each one your own method or approach to promote a positive motivation to the students, in order not to cause the avoidance in the use of phrasal verbs, a very common phenomenon among Chinese English learners, as we will see in our discussion.

## **5 CHINESE LEARNERS’ DIFFICULTIES: A CASE STUDY**

### **5.1 REASONS EFL LEARNERS AVOID THE USE OF PHRASAL VERBS**

According to Liao & Fukuya (2006, p. 74), in the literature are found three studies which have pointed out three possible cause for avoidance of PVs: “L1-L2 structural differences [(Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Kleinmann, 1977, 1978; Levenston, 1971; Schachter, 1974)], L1-L2 structural similarities [(Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Jordens, 1977; Kellerman, 1977, 1986)], and L2 complexity.”

Following the line enquiry of these three studies, Liao & Fukuya (2006) investigated the avoidance of PVs by Chinese learners of English, who do not have PVs structure in their mother tongue. Beyond the three causes quoted above, their study aimed at providing further evidence for avoidance in the context of structural differences between L1 and L2 as well as inherent semantic complexity of the target form, including also proficiency level, and test effect in order to investigate whether different formats of the elicitation tests would also play a role in the avoidance of PVs.

In their study, Liao and Fukuya (*op. cit.*) investigated three research questions: (1) Do Chinese learners avoid PVs? (2) Does their avoidance, if any, reflect differences in the semantic nature of PV types (figurative and literal)? and (3) Does their avoidance, if any, reflect the ways their performance is measured?

To answer these three questions, six hypotheses were created: 1) Chinese learners of English will avoid using PVs as compared with native speakers; 2) There will be no difference between advanced learners of English and intermediate learners of English in using PVs; 3) Chinese learners of English will avoid using figurative more than literal; 4) There will be no difference between the advanced learners of English and the intermediate learners of English in using figurative and literal PVs; 5) There will be no effect of test types on Chinese learners' use of PVs as a category; 6) There will be no effect of test type on the learners' use of figurative and literal PVs.

On the other hand, Chen (2007, p. 348), based on findings of a previous survey, "explores the reasons why Chinese learners of English are weak in understanding phrasal verbs and their tendency to avoid using them, especially in oral communication." According to him (*op. cit.*), various factors contribute to the avoidance of English PVs by Chinese Learners. These factors "are related to societal factors, institutional factors, teacher and learner's factors as well as ineffective curriculum documents."

Chen (2007) presents five reasons of avoiding PVs by the Chinese learners. First, he says that the lack of foreign language environment is probably one of the most important factors to cause avoidance of English PVs. He states that Chinese learners are exposed to very few opportunities of real situation of English communication, except practice in the classroom, which stop learners from having a good command of PVs, an item of fundamental importance to effective oral communication in English.

Second, he continues, the design of foreign language learning curriculum - a relevant factor for oral communication skill - did not accompanied "the rapid development of China's

economy and the growth of China's international status in the world." (*op. cit.* p. 349). Many employers that have invested into the Chinese market complain the lack of people able to communicate with clients who speak English only. Time requires Chinese Educational Authorities efforts to a very rapid reform in the English education curriculum, with communication skills put in an exceptionally place. And within this context, as PVs are components of fundamental relevance in communication, they must be emphasized in English language teaching and learning in China.

Another problem with Chinese learners concerns to internalize ineffective learning concepts and habits, which are related to some specific aspects: 1) vocabulary size; 2) exclusion of part of vocabulary that consists of more than one single word including phrasal verbs; 3) misunderstanding of appropriated vocabulary required for different functions; and 4) memorization of so-called words required instead most commonly used phrasal verbs, that are widely used for an effective and efficient communication.

Fourth, another reason to the avoidance of English PVs is the lack of educational resources development for oral communication that is reflected in teaching methodology. Chen (2007) assures that

There are few resources that cater for the needs of learning a language [...and] without sound resources that relate to learning to use phrasal verbs, effective teaching methods for learning vocabulary can hardly be employed in the classroom and efficient learn can never be guaranteed (CHEN, 2007, p.350).

Finally, according to him, in the process of EFL learning, Chinese learners have been greatly influenced by their mother tongue. He states that

[...] most modern Chinese words are one in meaning even though they consist of two or more characters. In the Chinese context, the learners are more likely to translate consciously or transfer unconsciously every single Chinese word (e.g. 'renshou') into corresponding English expression (e.g. 'tolerate') instead a phrasal verb (e.g. 'put up with'), even on the occasions when phrasal verbs are more idiomatic or authentic than one-word equivalents" (CHEN, 2007, p.351).

After considering the avoidance of English PVs by Chinese learners, Chen (*op. cit.*, p.351) reconsiders the context of English as an international language in China, in order to reorient English education, pointing some items: a) English learning motivation – Most of Chinese (80 per cent) learn English purely to gain a certificate; the other twenty percent can be classified as cultural and situational ones; b) English education learning outcomes gain – although the reformed College English Curriculum 2004, a very relevant guideline, shows the

learning results in terms of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), listening and speaking are emphasized, and the learners are expected to be able to perform a productive communication with English speakers; and c) More efficient vocabulary for learning outcomes – Chen (*op. cit.*) highlights the necessity “to regroup the vocabulary that is effective for oral communication and identify the vocabulary size” but in his point of view, first of all it is necessary “to know the difference between the old and the new outcomes and the different vocabulary caused by different learning outcomes required in the curriculum documents” (CHEN, 2007, p. 351).

In order to solve the problem of the avoidance of PVs in the Chinese context, the author (*op. cit.*) gives some suggestions, and some of them we consider of fundamental importance: 1) The necessity to explore effective methods in the Chinese context; 2) Testing new approaches, and in this particular teachers probably “may have to spend more time and energy in doing relevant research” ( CHEN, 2007, p. 352 ); 3) Probing the methods that are related to learning and teaching English vocabulary; and 4) Providing some ideas for teachers.

## 5.2 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS TO PHRASAL VERBS LEARNING

Considering the preponderant role PVs play to a communication in English (since they are omnipresent not only in oral communication, fiction and news, but in the academic prose as well), based on the theories used in this work, and on my teaching experience with EFL learners, I list here some points EFL/ESL teachers should take into account, within the context of PVs teaching and learning, which seem to be relevant to provide learners a painless learning.

First of all, although they are considered a very complex field within the English language, we EFL/ESL teachers should not neglect the teaching of PVs, otherwise the learners will never be able to speak or understanding English.

Secondly, in my teaching praxis, I recommend we should not approach PVs as a very difficult or impossible subject of being learned, since native speakers deal with them so easily, to the point of being able to coin new terms almost daily.

Thirdly, teachers always should teach PVs as any other lexical item in the English language, since the early lessons, keeping the students aware that one multi-word verb may have more than one meaning, as it occurs with many other words in any languages. In order to help the students in the learning process, we should make use of the tools available, as the dictionary, for example.



Fourthly, since course books do not show how to teach and learn PVs, each teacher should seek to develop appropriate methods, according to the learners' needs, in order to facilitate the learning.

Finally, we should present PVs always in a contextualized way, and in the extent a new one is learned, we should encourage learners to apply it in the context of the classroom and outside it, in order they can use it appropriately.

Acting on this way, probably we will be giving a very important step to transform the teaching and learning of these so-called "terrible and fearsome PVs" in something more pleasurable in the study of the English language.

## FINAL REMARKS

This work talked about the vocabulary teaching and learning; Phrasal Verbs definition; learners' difficulties; the teaching of PVs; the reasons EFL/ESL learners avoid the use of Phrasal Verbs; and pedagogical implications on PVs teaching and learning in the context of the classroom. The present research showed that PVs are considered a very complex field in the English language area, once they are expressions that refer to the Germanic languages, mostly to the English one. Due their complexity, the English PVs have become a "stumbling block" to the EFL/ESL learners, leading them to face serious difficulties to understand and use the multi-word verbs, especially in the context of an oral communication. These difficulties are related to structural, morphological, phonological and syntactic aspects, but mainly to semantic ones.

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Acting on this way, probably we will be giving a very important step to transform the teaching and learning of these so-called “terrible and fearsome PVs” in something more pleasurable in the study of the English language.

Although that is a challenging job for both, teachers and students, it is not impossible to be carried out in the classroom context. Doubtless it will require EFL/ESL teachers’ good willing, courage and determination; nevertheless, if they neglect this responsibility, they will be doing, as Siders (2007) states, a great disservice to the learners, since a knowledge of PVs is the condition *sine qua non* to speak or understand spoken English.

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