【Reports】

Tune In, Turn Off, Burn Out:
How Do We Teach Phrasal Verbs?

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Traditional methods for teaching phrasal verbs have been critiqued for fostering rote memorization and failing to facilitate a deeper understanding of them. However, cognitive linguistic approaches, which highlight spatial metaphors and cognitive image schemas, have demonstrated promise in enhancing phrasal verb acquisition. This paper aims to introduce the elusiveness of phrasal verbs, why they are difficult for students to learn, and what is the best approach to teach them. This review also gives an account of a study conducted at Tohoku University that investigated the effectiveness of three teaching approaches for phrasal verbs using an L1 translation, a cognitive image, and a collocative approach.

1 ．Introduction

Gardner and Davies (2007) note that "linguists and grammarians struggle with nuances of phrasal verb definitions" (p. 341). A typical interpretation describes a phrasal verb (henceforth PVs) as a combination of a verb and one or more particles, typically an adverb or a preposition, that functions as a single unit with a unique meaning, which is usually different from the definition of its separate parts (Koprowski, 2005). PVs can be either transitive (the verb takes a direct object) or intransitive (the verb cannot take a direct object).

Some transitive verbal phrases are separable. This means that the verb can be separated from the preposition by a direct object. In some cases, a single verb can assume distinct meanings when used in conjunction with different particles, as seen with examples like "call up," "call off," "call in," "call out," and "call on." Conversely, combined with different verbs, the same particle can convey diverse and sometimes contradictory interpretations. For instance, the particle "out" in "leave out" suggests

exiting from a location, while "lock out" implies being prevented from entering that same place (Talebinejad & Sadri, 2013).

In a study conducted by Dagut & Laufer (1985), they categorized PVs into three distinct groups:

(a) Literal PVs: These are PVs where the meaning can be directly inferred from the individual words that make up the phrase. They are the easiest to learn because their meanings are usually clear from their context. For example, "come in" as in "It is cold outside. Please. "*Come in*." This is an intransitive PV that does not need an object.

(b) Figurative or Idiomatic PVs: This category includes PVs like "patch up," as in "They finally patched up their differences," which expresses dealing with a problem to improve a relationship. With idiomatic PVs, the meaning of the entire phrase goes beyond the literal meanings of its parts, resulting in idiomatic expressions.

(c) Completive or Aspectual Verbs: These PVs involve particles that indicate a task's completion, initiation, or continuation. Examples include "start

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out," "eat up," and "carry on."

This semantic complexity of some PV meanings, being highly idiomatic and opaque, makes them particularly difficult for language learners to learn (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015). PVs are commonly used in English, leading Celce- Murcia, & Larsen-Freeman (1999) to claim that they are "ubiquitous" (p. 425). According to Gardner and Davies (2007), learners can encounter at least one PV in every 150 words of text they read, and McCarthy & O'Dell (2007) suggest that there are over 5000 PVs currently used in English. However, despite their importance and usefulness, PVs are often avoided by L2 learners (Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

PVs enjoy widespread use among native English speakers, yet they have proven challenging for individuals learning English as a second language (Moon, 1997; Kao, 2001). The notion of what is the most effective method for teaching PVs also remains a matter of ongoing debate.

This paper gives an introductory examination of the complexity of PVs through a review of the literature. It investigates the two main approaches (traditional and cognitive) employed to teach them. This is followed by a description of a joint study conducted at Tohoku University on three approaches to teaching PVs through a quasi-experimental design study.

2．The Elusiveness of Phrasal Verbs

Many studies have looked at the difficulty of PVs being notoriously difficult to learn (Garnier & Schmitt 2015, 2016; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). Reasons for their difficulty in learning include their complexity and peculiarity as represented in their semantic and syntactic structure (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993).

Some PVs are fixed and predominantly convey idiomatic meanings, while other PVs offer greater flexibility, permitting the movement of their particles within their structures (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015; Liu,

2011). This range in form and meaning poses a considerable challenge for second language learners, particularly regarding their productive use (Omidan et al., 2019).

Gardner and Davies (2007) suggest that there are 5.6 different meanings for each of the most commonly used PVs, which is testimony to their highly polysemous nature. How PVs are presented and taught in textbooks also shows their arbitrariness and indicates an unsystematic way of teaching them (Moon, 1997; Tyler & Evans, 2004).

For many Japanese learners of English, grappling with PVs remains a persistent challenge. This difficulty can largely be attributed to a fundamental difference in how English and Japanese incorporate spatial and orientational concepts into their vocabulary. In English, these orientational senses are encoded using particles, whereas in Japanese, they are integrated directly into the verb itself (Yasuda, 2010, p. 251).

Therefore, it is unsurprising that even advanced-level students often exhibit limited proficiency in PVs. Learners who are unaware of the unique role that particles and prepositions play in enhancing the main verb might view PVs as enigmatic idiomatic expressions. As a result, they might resort to rote memorization as their primary strategy for mastering PVs (Side, 1990). This misconception of how PVs should be taught has led teachers and textbook publishers to emphasize this memorization-based approach (Farsani et al., 2012). The following section looks at two of the main approaches to teaching PVs.

3．Teaching Phrasal Verbs

Traditional approaches for instructing PVs have typically emphasized syntactical aspects, specifically, whether they are transitive or intransitive, and in the case of the former, whether they are separable or not. Many textbooks follow this approach (See

Fuchs & Bonner, 2006; Wisniewska et al., 2007), and PVs are frequently categorized based on their underlying lexical verbs, such as "get up," "get back," "get off," and "get over." Classroom exercises are created to assess the learner's understanding of these distinctions. However, there is criticism of this approach within the literature (See Cornell, 1985; Darwin & Gray, 1999; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Moon, 1997; Tyler & Evans, 2004), especially in creating a list of PVs with their translations and definitions and following this up with a gap-fill exercise. This approach presents PVs as "arbitrary combinations which cannot be analyzed and rationalized" (Moon, 1997. p.46). Such an approach can lead to memorization of these PVs without reference to any semantic analysis or conceptual considerations. van der Veer (2000) suggests that this may prevent the application of knowledge to new contexts, leading to students struggling when encountering PVs outside of these textbook activities.

Criticism of this approach led to exploring other ways of teaching PVs. Over the past two decades, these new practices have emphasized a cognitive linguistic approach.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the understanding of PVs centers on the notion that particles serve as orientational metaphors closely tied to spatial orientations stemming from experiences of the human body such as up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, and central-peripheral (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Consequently, understanding these spatial connotations of the particles through a cognitive image schema can assist students in learning PVs. This approach typically focuses on the particle for meaning or a diagram highlighting the image schema that motivates the PV (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003; Tyler & Evans, 2003).

Studies on PVs have shown that different teaching approaches have varying beneficial effects on acquiring them. Within the Japanese EFL context, Yasuda (2010) conducted a study with 115 Japanese university students to examine if orientational metaphors would help students learn 21 metaphorical PVs in contrast to a control group that learned PVs through a traditional approach. The experimental group was told to pay attention to the particle to determine the meaning of the PV, while the control group was asked to memorize the meaning and translation of the PVs. Class instruction lasted around 10 minutes, and both groups of students were asked to complete gap-fill exercises with the PV particles. These tests included 15 previously taught PVs and 15 new PVs. Results showed that both groups did well for the taught PVs but that the experimental group outshone the control group for the new PVs. Yasuda (2010) attributes this to the students' ability to apply the motivations of the PVs to new and unlearned ones. That is, learners were more conscious of the spatial and sensory connotations of particles.

In a similar study, Talebinejad & Sadri (2013) focused on 20 PVs with the two particles *up* and *down* with 60 Iranian EFL learners. Students were assigned to two groups (i.e., experimental and control). The experimental group learned the target PVs through a cognitive-based approach, and students in the control group were presented with dictionary definitions and single-verb equivalents of the target PVs. Results showed that the experimental group was more proficient at recalling the meaning of learned PVs, and they successfully transferred their cognitive knowledge of learned PVs to unfamiliar ones, similar to the Yasuda (2010) study.

In another study conducted in Japan, Birdsell (2021) investigated three different approaches to teaching PVs: a control group (using L1 support), a cognitive group (using images), and an enactment group (embodied learning – gestures, body movements). He found that all three groups of students improved

their scores on a post-test, suggesting that short teaching sessions facilitate learners' comprehension of PVs. However, using *imagery* and *enactment* was statistically more effective than teaching them through the L1.

These studies suggest that employing a cognitive linguistic approach to teaching PVs, whether by structuring them according to the underlying metaphorical structures that drive their meanings or by physically acting out their meaning, offers distinct learning benefits.

At Tohoku University, we have created a new curriculum founded on the principles of EGAP. It is based on the students learning a series of core skills. In the English IB course, we have a core skill labeled *Idiomatic Language* that comprises *Metaphors*, *Phrasal verbs*, and *Idioms*. As part of my research examining appropriate pedagogical approaches to teaching the core skills within our new curriculum, I collaborated with Professor Birdsell from Hirosaki University. We worked on extending his 2021 study with students at Tohoku and Hirosaki University. The following section gives an account of our research and subsequent findings.

4. Phrasal Verbs and Teaching Interventions: A Study at Tohoku and Hirosaki University

Kavanagh & Birdsell (2022)[1] conducted an 8-week longitudinal in-class study to analyze the effect of 3 different teaching approaches on students learning PVs. 205 first-year students from Tohoku and Hirosaki University took part in this study. The students were spread across three classes from each university and came from various departments. Each of the three classes at each university was randomly divided into three teaching groups as follows: the L1 translation group ($N = 70$), the cognitive image group ($N = 70$), and the collocation group ($N = 65$). The research aimed to examine if students improved their knowledge of PVs via a pretest-posttest design

and to investigate which teaching group produced better test scores over the other groups in the post-tests.

During the first week of the 15-week courses, all students at both universities underwent a pre-test focusing on the 40 PVs included in the study. This test was created to assess the students' existing knowledge of PVs. The test questions were randomly drawn from the list of 40 PVs, ensuring a mix of both literal and metaphorical usage for each PV. Consequently, the test encompassed 20 questions of each type, either in their literal or metaphorical interpretations.

A literal sense example of a PV would be in the use of 'step in' in the following sentence: "*On my way to my interview, I **stepped in** a puddle, and now my pants are soaking wet!*" which describes a movement into something. A *metaphorical example of the same PV would express the attempt to try and prevent something happening, as in; "The government **stepped in** to prevent a general strike.*"

In the pre-test, students were given 40 sentences to complete and given the initials of the phrasal verb and a hint at the end of each sentence. Here is an example of a typical question used in the test.

- If we don't want our luck to r___ o___, we have to figure out what to do. (Something that is used up)

The sentences used in the pre-test were taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (https://www.english-corpora.org/coca).

During weeks 2 to 9, students from both universities viewed narrated PowerPoint videos, each lasting approximately 10 to 12 minutes, that were created by the researchers. Within these eight videos, students were introduced to five PVs organized according to the particle (or adverb) they contained. Each PV was presented with its literal and metaphorical meanings, allowing students to

understand both senses of the PV.

All three groups (L1 translation, images, and collocations) were exposed to identical PVs during each session. These PVs were presented in a consistent order, with the only variation being the instructional method employed for each group. The L1 Translation group was presented with slides (See Figures 1 & 2) that explained the meaning of the PV with Japanese support. Figure 1 shows the literal meaning, and Figure 2 shows the metaphorical meaning of the PV *break off*. The Image Group (See Figures 3 & 4) was presented with slides that gave the students schematic images representing the PV's meaning. Again, they learned an example of the literal and metaphorical meaning of the PV. The third group of students in the collocation group (See figures 5 & 6) learned the PVs through a collocative approach, where students learned the literal and metaphorical sense of the PV through the context it is used. Learning collocations equips learners to anticipate how words combine in broader contexts. For instance, when considering the metaphorical usage of the phrasal verb "go through," it is regularly used in contexts such as divorce, breakups, bankruptcy, and depression. Additionally, it typically accompanies adjectives like "traumatic" and "horrible." (Birdsell & Kavanagh, 2023).

Figure1．L1 Translation Group

Break off – remove something from a larger unit or whole 「〈物の一部が〉（欠けて, 折れて）はずれる, 取れる」

"While eating in Tuscany, we **broke off** pieces of bread and dipped them in olive oil."

「トスカーナで食事中、パンを**割いて**オリーブオイルにつけて食べた。」

Figure 2．L1 Translation Group

Break off – suddenly stop or discontinue something 「〈交渉などが〉**打ち切られる**.」

"Three days of UN-sponsored negotiations in neighboring Pakistan **broke off**, but are scheduled to resume next month."

「隣国パキスタンでの3日間にわたる国連主催の交渉は**決裂**したが、来月再開される予定である。」

Figure 3．Image Group

Break off – remove something from a larger unit or whole

"While eating in Tuscany, we **broke off** pieces of bread and dipped them in olive oil."

Figure 4．Image Group

Break off – suddenly stop or discontinue something

"Three days of UN-sponsored negotiations in neighboring Pakistan **broke off**, but are scheduled to resume next month."

Figure 5．Collocation Group

Break off – remove something from a larger unit or whole

"While eating in Tuscany, we **broke off** pieces of bread and dipped them in olive oil."

- A piece of ice: Iceberg, glacier
- A piece of food: Crust, bread
- A part of a tool/clothing: Handle, heel (high heel shoes), tip of the knife

Figure 6. Collocation Group

Break off   Take off   Fall off   Cut off   Get off

Break off – suddenly stop or discontinue something

"Three days of UN-sponsored **negotiations** *in neighboring Pakistan* **broke off**, *but are scheduled to resume next month. "*

- **End a relationship: Engagement, friendship, contact**
- **End dialogue: Talks, communications, negotiations**

Figures taken from Birdsell & Kavanagh (2023)

5. Results

The Kavanagh & Birdsell (2022) study found that students improved their PV knowledge through the teaching interventions in all the groups. There was a statistically significant gain between student pre- and post-PV test scores $t(164) = -13.7$ $p = .000$. However, a comparison of the three groupings based on the teaching methods using a one-way ANOVA showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the post-test scores between at least two of the groupings $F(.522)$ $p = .978$.

The image support group did not yield better test score results than the L1 translation group, in contrast to the findings of previous research (Yasuda, 2010). Birdsell & Kavanagh (2023) suggest that this could be the result of the methodology employed and the number of PVs used. 40 PVs were used in comparison to research that only focused on twenty PVs with the particles 'up' or 'down' (Talebinejad & Sadri, 2013) or 21 PVs with five particles (Yasuda (2010). In examining how the PVs chosen within the study may have influenced the findings, Birdesell & Kavanagh (2023) broke down the results into three key areas -frequency of use, PV sense (literal or figurative), and learnability.

The PVs that students got the highest scores in the posttest were all on the PHaVE List, a pedagogical list of PVs and their most frequent meanings (see Garnier & Schmitt, 2015). This would

suggest that these commonly used PVs are more likely to be encountered by language learners and the students within this study sample. The analysis also showed that the highest-scoring PV items on the post-test were PVs that predominately had a literal sense instead of a figurative or metaphorical meaning.

This combination of high frequency and using the literal sense of the PV may account for the high percentage of them being answered correctly. This, in turn, indicated the learnability of the PVs used in the study. Those frequently used PVs that have a literal meaning produced the most gains between the pre and post-test in terms of correct answers and were therefore classified as having a high level of learnability.

In contrast, PVs that scored low on the pre/post tests and showed no significant difference were not on the PhaVE List or were metaphorical in their meanings. The fact that scores were low on the pre-tests with incremental and non-significant gains in the post-test would indicate that these PVs were challenging to learn based on their metaphorical meaning. Based on these observations, these PVs had a low level of learnability, which likely indicates that the students had never been exposed to them before this study.

6. Discussion

The studies conducted in Japan outlined above were done within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where exposure to PVs is arguably more infrequent in comparison to students studying within an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment. Gilquin (2023) examined the differences in usage among EFL and ESL learners and found a wide range of differing PV usage between the two groups. She found that students in ESL contexts resembled native English speakers in how they used PVs compared to their EFL counterparts. She argues

that this is primarily the result of students being exposed to and using PVs within a daily context, in contrast to EFL learners whose primary source of exposure is limited to language lessons and the input from their teacher.

Similarly, Omidan et al. (2019) discovered that explicit instruction and focus on form are less effective than repeated exposure in predicting students' PV knowledge. Their findings showed that English language learners who spent more time reading and watching movies and TV had a better knowledge and understanding of PVs.

Birdsell & Kavanagh (2023) conclude that their research replicates other studies (Yasuda, 2010) that affirm students' low proficiency level regarding PVs and why they are essential to learn but challenging to master. Their study also showed that students can significantly improve their understanding of PVs through teaching interventions, as exemplified by student pre-test and post-test scores being significantly different. This can be described as evidence that even brief exposure to PVs, such as a mini lesson lasting 10-15 minutes at the beginning of a class, can have a positive impact. However, more research is needed to examine the best way to teach PVs in the EFL context to Japanese learners of English at the university level.

7．Conclusion

This paper examined why PVs are challenging to acquire for learners of English while also emphasizing their importance for English language learners. The intricate nature of PVs and their elusive meanings pose a substantial challenge for English learners, particularly Japanese students in EFL contexts. Traditional teaching methods, rooted in syntactical distinctions, have been criticized for fostering rote memorization and failing to facilitate a deeper understanding of PVs. However, cognitive linguistic approaches, which highlight spatial metaphors and cognitive image schemas, have demonstrated promise in enhancing PV acquisition. The Birdsell & Kavanagh (2023) study at two national universities, examining the effectiveness of three teaching interventions, reaffirmed the complexity of PVs. While all groups displayed improved PV knowledge, no significant differences were observed among the teaching methods.

Nevertheless, this research reveals the need for continued exploration in PV instruction. Further investigations must consider factors like exposure and instructional methodologies to optimize PV teaching for Japanese university students in EFL settings and our curriculum here at Tohoku University. As PVs remain integral to English language usage, addressing this challenge is crucial for enhancing language learning experiences and proficiency.

Note

1 ）This research was approved by the ethics committee at the Institute of Excellence at Tohoku University (k00314)

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