PHRASAL VERBS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION: FREQUENCY, FUNCTION, AND PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract
Phrasal verbs constitute one of the most distinctive and frequently used features of English vocabulary. Despite their prevalence in authentic communication, they remain challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners because of their idiomaticity, polysemy, and syntactic variability. This article examines the significance of learning phrasal verbs and their contribution to communicative competence, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, listening skills, and fluency.

Keywords: *phrasal verbs, vocabulary acquisition, English language teaching, communicative competence, corpus linguistics, EFL learners.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second language proficiency. Among various lexical categories, phrasal verbs represent one of the most challenging yet indispensable aspects of English vocabulary. Phrasal verbs consist of a lexical verb combined with one or more particles, creating meanings that often differ from the meanings of individual components. According to Paul Nation, vocabulary knowledge plays a decisive role in language comprehension and production. High-frequency lexical items deserve special attention because they provide the greatest communicative return for learners.

Research conducted by Dee Gardner and Mark Davies demonstrated that phrasal verbs occur extensively in authentic English discourse and therefore cannot be ignored in language teaching. Their corpus-based analysis of the British National Corpus revealed that only 100 high-frequency phrasal verbs account for more than half of all phrasal verb occurrences in the corpus [1, p. 349]. Many learners tend to avoid phrasal verbs and replace them with single-word equivalents. However, such avoidance often results in speech that sounds overly formal or unnatural. As a consequence, understanding the importance of phrasal verbs has become a significant concern for researchers and language educators. The purpose of this study is to examine why learning phrasal verbs is essential for English language proficiency and to synthesize evidence from major studies in the field.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative review methodology. Relevant literature was selected from peer-reviewed journal articles, corpus-based investigations, and studies on second language acquisition. The review focused on three categories:

- Corpus-based studies examining frequency and usage patterns.
- Vocabulary acquisition studies investigating learner difficulties.

- Cognitive linguistic research explaining semantic motivation and instructional effectiveness.

The selected publications include works by Gardner and Davies (2007), Nation (2013), Darwin and Gray (1999), Strong (2025), and Feng and Yang (2025). These studies were analyzed to identify recurring themes regarding the importance of phrasal verbs in language learning.

RESULTS

Corpus evidence demonstrates that phrasal verbs are pervasive in both spoken and written English. Gardner and Davies found that a relatively small set of phrasal verbs dominates authentic language use [1, p. 347]. They reported that 25 phrasal verbs account for approximately one-third of all phrasal verb occurrences in the British National Corpus, while 100 phrasal verbs represent more than half of all identified occurrences [1, p. 349]. This finding suggests that teaching high-frequency phrasal verbs can substantially improve learners' communicative competence.

Finding	Result
Total phrasal verb occurrences analyzed	518,923
Most frequent lexical verbs involved	20
Most frequent particle combinations	8
Phrasal verbs accounting for one-third of occurrences	25
Phrasal verbs accounting for over half of occurrences	100

Table 1. Corpus Findings on Phrasal Verb Frequency

According to Clayton Darwin and Loretta Gray, phrasal verbs are central to everyday English communication because native speakers use them naturally and frequently. Expressions such as *give up*, *carry on*, *figure out*, and *put off* occur regularly in conversations, films, podcasts, and academic interactions. Learners who lack knowledge of these expressions often struggle to understand authentic speech.

Nation argues that vocabulary knowledge extends beyond simple word recognition and includes knowledge of meaning, collocation, register, and use [2, p. 49]. Because many phrasal verbs are polysemous, learning them promotes deeper lexical knowledge. For example, *take off* may mean:

- remove clothing,
- leave the ground (aircraft),
- become successful,

- imitate someone. Consequently, learning phrasal verbs contributes not only to vocabulary size but also to vocabulary depth.

Recent research by Yan Feng and Mei Yang found that retrieval-based and continuation-based learning activities significantly improve phrasal verb acquisition among university students. The researchers concluded that structured practice facilitates both retention and productive use of phrasal verbs. Similarly, Brian Strong emphasized that corpus-based instruction and cognitive linguistic approaches help learners understand figurative meanings and reduce memorization difficulties.

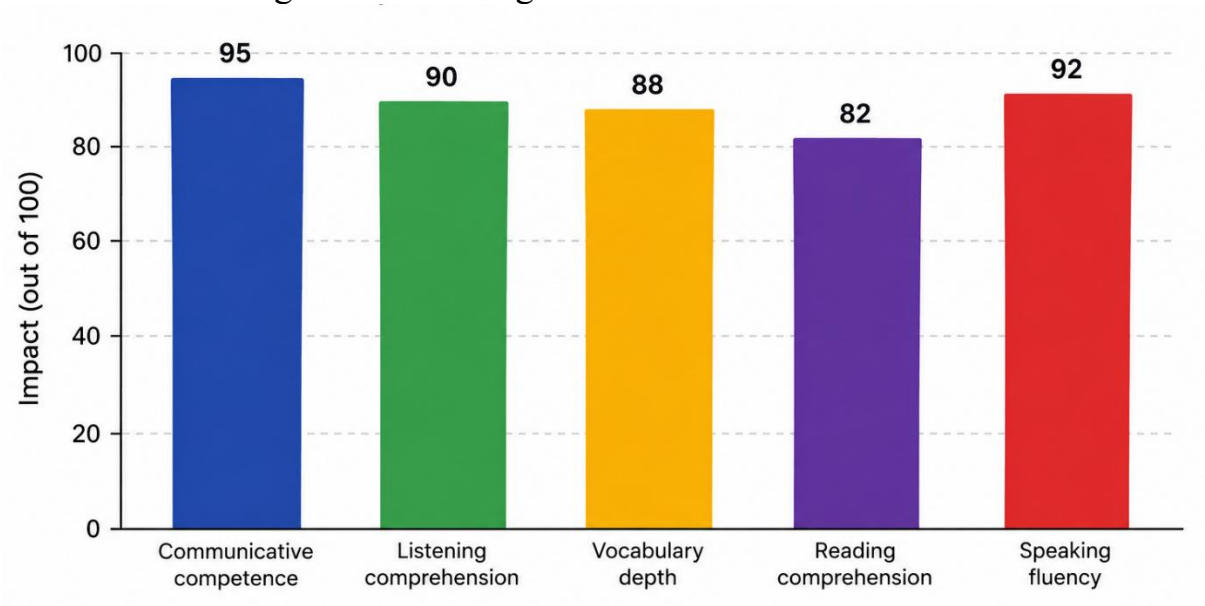


Table 2. Major benefits of learning phrasal verbs

Relative contribution to English language proficiency based on findings synthesized from the reviewed literature.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature consistently highlights the central role of phrasal verbs in English language proficiency. Gardner and Davies argue that phrasal verbs are not peripheral vocabulary items but rather a core component of English communication [1, p. 340]. One of the major reasons learners struggle with phrasal verbs is their idiomatic nature. Unlike transparent combinations such as *sit down*, many phrasal verbs possess figurative meanings that cannot be inferred directly from their components. This challenge is particularly evident among learners whose first languages lack equivalent constructions. Strong notes that cognitive linguistic approaches can address this issue by helping learners identify conceptual patterns underlying particles such as *up*, *out*, *off*, and *through*. These approaches enable learners to construct meaningful semantic networks rather than memorizing isolated expressions.

CONCLUSION

The present review demonstrates that learning phrasal verbs is essential for achieving proficiency in English. Corpus-based evidence confirms their high frequency in authentic language use, while vocabulary research highlights their contribution to lexical depth and communicative competence. The findings indicate that phrasal verbs:

- occur frequently in authentic discourse;

- enhance speaking and listening proficiency;
- contribute to vocabulary depth;
- improve reading comprehension;
- promote more natural and native-like communication.

Furthermore, contemporary instructional approaches, including corpus-informed selection, retrieval practice, and cognitive linguistic methods, have shown considerable effectiveness in facilitating phrasal verb acquisition. Therefore, phrasal verbs should be regarded not as optional vocabulary items but as a fundamental component of English language education.

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