

The Relations between Learning Phrasal Verbs and Language Proficiency in English

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العلاقة بين تعلم الأفعال الثنائية التركيب
والكفاءة في الأداء اللغوي

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الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة العلاقات ذات المتغيرات المتعددة لاكتساب الطلاب الأفعال الثنائية التركيب ومدى ارتباط ذلك بدرجات الكفاءة في اختبار التنبؤ (cloze)، واختبارين اثنين معترف بهما دولياً، وهما: اختبار اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية التوفل TOEFL، واختبار الشهادة الأولى في الإنجليزية (FCE)؛ وذلك من أجل معرفة القدرة التنبؤية لدرجات الطلاب في الأفعال الثنائية التركيب، وعما إذا كان اكتساب هذه الأفعال دليلاً على التحصيل في اختبار التوفل أو الشهادة الإنجليزية الأولى، بالإضافة إلى أدائهم الكلي في الجامعة حسب مقياس المعدل التراكمي الكلي. بلغ عدد أفراد العينة ٧٨ طالبا مسجلين في جامعة البحرين.

وقد أظهر تحليل الاختبار الثنائي المتعدد للبيانات بأن درجات الطلاب في اختبار الأفعال الثنائية التركيب يرتبط بصورة كبيرة مع كافة المتغيرات التي تم تجريبها. وتشير النتائج إلى اكتساب الطلاب للأفعال الثنائية التركيب يعد اختباراً جيداً في التنبؤ بمدى نجاحهم في اختبار التوفل، واختبار الشهادة الأولى الإنجليزية. وتشير النتائج المنهجية للدراسة إلى أن على المتخصصين التربويين في هذا المجال أن يركزوا على تعريف الطلاب على الأفعال الثنائية التركيب في اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال استخدام المواد القرائية الإضافية المساندة في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the multivariate relationships of students' acquisition of a number of common phrasal verbs and their proficiency scores on the cloze test with their scores on two internationally recognized tests, i.e. the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the First Certificate of English (FCE). This is to determine whether students' scores on the phrasal verb test can act as a predictor of their achievement in the TOEFL or the FCE together with their performance at the University as measured by the overall grade-point average (GPA). The subjects for the study were 78 students enrolled at the University of Bahrain. The bivariate analysis of the data showed that the students' scores on the phrasal verb test correlated vary significantly with all the variables tested. Results indicate that the students' acquisition of phrasal verbs is a better test instrument in predicting their success in either the TOEFL or the FCE than the cloze. The methodological outcome of the study leads educational practitioners to focus their attention on familiarising the students with commonly used phrasal verbs in English through the use of both intensive and extensive EFL supplementary reading materials.

Phrasal verbs and English language learning

McArther and Atkins (1995) defined phrasal verbs as combinations of simple, monosyllabic verbs (put, take, get etc.) and members of a set of particles (on, up, out etc.). This combination is nowadays referred to as phrasal verbs simply because it represents the appearance of a two-word phrase rather than a single one. Foreign language learners experience difficulties while attempting to learn phrasal verbs for a number of reasons. McArther and Atkins (1995) assert that the problem is four-fold:

- a. A verb of this type may have a meaning which is simply the sum of its parts, but may also have a meaning which bears little apparent relation to those parts.
- b. The particle may indicate some kind of direction but may just as easily have a meaning little related to direction.
- c. The same particle can serve as a preposition or adverb and a student can easily confuse these functions.
- d. There are so many phrasal verbs in modern English (and the number is constantly growing); they are so important in the spoken language, and they have so many shades of meaning that the student may despair of ever mastering this area of language. This situation has been aggravated by the lack of a good description of phrasal verbs, and by a shortage of useful teaching material. (p. 5)

Swierzbinska (1996) stated that phrasal verbs occur frequently in written and spoken English and may be difficult for non-native speakers to understand and produce, particularly when parts of the phrasal verb should be separated and when they should be adjacent. Cornell (1985) discussed acquisition of phrasal verbs of English as a second language, and examined problems of selection, semantics, and usage restrictions of these verbs. Because even advanced learners have difficulties with these verbs, he suggested two groups of verb phrases: one for active use and the other for passive. Azzaro (1992) defined English phrasal verbs and analysed Italian students' problems when studying them.

He offered important insights through contrastive analysis of English and Italian syntax and study of students' errors.

Much of the literature written on phrasal verbs focuses on either defining and describing phrasal verbs or coins a few pedagogical hints on how foreign learners of the language may acquire phrasal verbs more meaningfully under alternative learning or teaching strategies. To the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has attempted to test EFL students' acquisition of certain common phrasal verbs and to measure the reliability of phrasal verb test in relation to other standardized forms of tests. Thus this paper aims at measuring the relations between students' acquisition of certain common phrasal verbs and their proficiency in common English tests and to determine the reliability of a phrasal verb test in predicting their success in the language.

Standardized tests and academic success in EFL

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which is developed and administered by the Educational Testing Service, is an internationally recognized test given to students who seek admission to graduate programs in 2,400 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. It is considered to be the most widely used test determining the extent to which international students have developed the English language skills necessary for successful college-level study in these two countries. A number of studies have attempted to measure the predictive validity of the TOEFL scores and have indicated the success of the test as a predictor of students' academic achievement as demonstrated by their overall grade point average (GPA). The first study of this kind was that of Ayers and Peters (1977) on 50 students who had completed a master's program in the physical sciences or engineering. They found a significant correlation between the TOEFL scores and students' composite GPA. While this result has been confirmed by a number of further studies conducted on the TOEFL scores as determinants of academic achievement of graduate and undergraduate students (Bostic, 1981; Stover, 1981; Perry, 1989;

Stoyhoff, 1991; Schmidt, 1992; Konyu-fogel, 1994), the findings of other studies (Sokari, 1980; Hale, et al., 1984; Light, et al., 1987; Taylor, 1989; Hu, 1991; Ayres and Peters, 1977; Case, 1993; Qi, 1994; Yan, 1995) suggest that using the TOEFL as a major determinant of an international student's admission to various academic programs in colleges and universities as well as a predictor of the students' subsequent academic success should be reconsidered. The FCE, as compared to the TOEFL, has received little attention from the specialists in the field of English language testing. This is evident from the relatively small number of studies which have examined aspects of the FCE as an EFL test as compared with the TOEFL (Bachman et al., 1990; Choi, 1990; Kunnan, 1992; Choi and Batchman, 1992 and Ryan and Batchman, 1992). Results of Al-Musawi and Al-Ansari (1999) on undergraduate students at the University of Bahrain have revealed that the FCE cloze and sentence transformation sub-scores are the only test scores that tend to contribute to the prediction of both students' GPA and their GPA in English courses. Their results have indicated that the FCE is a better test instrument than the TOEFL, particularly when English is being taught as a foreign language. It can be seen here that there has always been certain standardized language tests that were measured for their degree of prediction of EFL learners' success in the language.

Statement of the Problem

As a matter of fact, learners of English as a foreign language normally experience enormous difficulties while attempting to learn phrasal verbs. Exercises on phrasal verbs are usually found at the end of any grammar book which clearly means that such grammatical components are meant to be learnt after the comprehension and manipulation of the usual grammar items, i.e. the tenses, the conditionals, the passives, the modals and so on. One can assume that if the inclusion of such essential grammar items in any standardized cloze tests proves to make them true test of proficiency, then the inclusion of phrasal verbs will be more difficult because

the students require to understand and exploit an enormous number of commonly used phrasal verbs.

To the best knowledge of the researchers, the inclusion of commonly used phrasal verbs in any standardized language tests has probably not been either attempted or measured. This paper therefore includes a further testing component in the analysis, i.e. phrasal verbs so as to determine whether they can act as predictors of learners' success in English. In other words, will students who have acquired more phrasal verbs succeed more in the language than those who have acquired less? And whether we could use a standardized phrasal verb test as a predictor of success in English alongside already existing measured tests, i.e. TOEFL, FCE and the cloze.

Methodology

Subjects: The subjects for this study consisted of 78 third- and fourth-year students who were following a degree programme in English Language and Literature at the University of Bahrain. Their degree is based on a credit system of university education. Students need to complete 131 credits in order to graduate, 93 of which are studied within students' major and minor subject specialisation. The subjects were homogeneous in respect of age, nationality, mother tongue and both cultural and educational background. They were asked to read each sentence and to fill in the blank(s) using a correct phrasal verb. No list of phrasal verbs was given. Instead the first letter of each phrasal verb was given as a clue. The phrasal verbs have been chosen from the ones that normally appear in their required language courses.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): The TOEFL is designed to evaluate English proficiency of people whose native language is not English. The test uses a multiple-choice format to measure the ability to understand North American English. The institutional form of the TOEFL used in the current study consisted of three sections: Listening Comprehension (Section 1), Structure and Written Expression (Section 2), and Vocabulary and Reading

Comprehension (Section 3). Scores from the three are combined to yield a total score that is reported in addition to the section scores. Each section has its own scale, ranging from a score of about 200 to about 680. The normal procedure for obtaining the overall TOEFL score is that the total sum is derived by summing the three scores and multiplying the result by 10/3.

Section 1 of the TOEFL measures the ability to understand English as it is spoken in North America. Section 2 measures the ability to recognize language that is appropriate for standard written English. Section 3 measures the ability to understand non-technical reading matter.

The First Certificate of English Test (FCE): The purpose of the FCE is to assess the English language skills of people whose native language is not English. This test consists of seven papers: Reading Comprehension involving multiple-choice items plus reading passages, Cloze test, Sentence Transformation tests, Word Formation test, Listening Comprehension test, and an Interview. Paper 1 includes forty 4-option multiple-choice items in parts: vocabulary (25 items) and reading comprehension (15 items). Paper 2 includes a cloze test in the form of a passage with blanks, which the examinee has to fill in each with one word only. Paper 3 is a reading passage followed by five 4-option multiple-choice questions. Paper 4 of the FCE is a set of ten sentences, which the examinee has to rewrite without changing the original meaning of each sentence. The examinee has got to use the words given at the beginning of the sentence without changing the meaning. In the second part of the sentence transformation test, the examinee has to change the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. The examinee must not change the word given and must use between two and five words. This second sentence transformation test is slightly more difficult than the conventional style used in part one of the sentence transformation test. Paper 5, which also includes ten sentences, assesses students' linguistic ability in word building. Paper 6 consists of a series of recorded texts, and the examinee has to answer the different questions based on his or her understanding of the

texts. Finally, Paper 7 assesses the student's ability to give short talks on prepared topics, and to discuss how to solve specific problem situations.

The phrasal verb test: A total number of twenty-two commonly used phrasal verbs comprised the test instrument used for the study. To conform the validity of the test, four language experts at the English Department examined all the items. They expressed their total satisfaction with almost all the items except only three which they thought they would be too difficult to answer. Thus these three items were excluded from the study. So the final test consisted of only 19 commonly known phrasal verbs to the students.

Reliability of the phrasal verb test: To determine the reliability of the phrasal verb test used, the entire test was administered twice as a pre-and post-tests. The gap between the two tests was three weeks. A Cronbach alfa reliability test was used to test the reliability between the items in the two tests, together with a split-half method. The results are as follows:

A Split half reliability test: The relation between respondents' scores for the two halves (first half and the second half) was computed. The correlation for the two halves was .72 which indicates that the data is highly reliable.

B Cronbach alpha test: It was used to measure the correlation coefficient for every two items of the phrasal verb test. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1: Results of Cronbach's alpha reliability test

Phrasal verb test items	Alpha = α
1. A thief b _____ our house last week but the police caught him.	.62
2. Would you let me know if you c _____ that book?	.88
3. What was she g _____ when she said that?	.65
4. My parents l _____ when I was a child.	.69
5. He'll r _____ difficulties if he tries to do that.	.26
6. Somebody has got to s _____ that broken chair.	.79
7. What doe UB s _____?	.65
8. The story t _____ to be very exciting at the end.	.62
9. I have never a _____ my father _____. I respect him a lot.	.84
10. I p _____ him _____ for what he did to me.	.71
11. I hate l _____ my friends _____ when they ask for something.	.78
12. I have always b _____ him _____ in his career and he is grateful for this.	.93
13. I was b _____ in a small village.	.47
14. He often m _____ stories which people believed.	.43
15. I had to c _____ the meeting last week.	.57
16. The telephone operator p _____ me _____ before I had finished speaking.	.83
17. What g _____ the thief _____ was the fact that he had left his fingerprints.	.72
18. Can you f _____ what time the film starts.	.52
19. The boxer lost the fight when he was k _____ in the third round.	.57

Analysis

A general linear multivariate regression was made using the SPSS for the overall score of the FCE and the TOEFL total score, together with their scores on the phrasal verb test. These analyses were supplemented by a stepwise regression to explore the contribution of certain sub-scores to the multivariate model. The same general linear multivariate regression was computed, using the total TOEFL score and the overall FCE as dependent variables. The general linear multivariate regression was also applied for the students' composite grade point average (GPA). The general linear model differs from a stepwise regression in its considerations of the contributions of all test scores simultaneously. In effect, the final product of a stepwise regression in which both the cloze and the phrasal verb independent variables were entered into the model is equivalent to the general linear regression.

Results 1 Comparability of examinees' scores

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the component variables pertaining to the examinations taken by the whole sample.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations achieved on all test components

Test component	minimum	maximum	mean	S. D.
Listening	370.00	610.00	507.50	44.51
Structure	360.00	650.00	495.65	64.48
Reading	310.00	620.00	493.72	59.34
Toefl	360.00	627.00	498.52	47.24
FCE	52.00	97.00	76.53	9.78
Cloze	10.00	20.00	15.20	2.49
GPA	1.19	3.75	2.65	.53
Phrasal Verbs	.00	19.00	10.12	3.58

It is interesting to note that the students' mean scores on sections 1, 2, and 3 of the TOEFL tend to reliably correspond to the mean scores achieved by a large sample of examinees ($n = 731297$) who took this test from July 1995 through June 1996. These scores were 52.10, 51.81 and 51.38, respectively, with corresponding standard deviations of 7.30, 7.62, and 8.53. The total score mean of these examinees, on the TOEFL, was 517.00 with a standard deviation of 71.04 (Educational Testing Service, 1997). Their mean score on the FCE was predictable since the majority of the students passed the test with a grade of C+ average, which is equivalent to 76%. However, their mean score on the phrasal verb test shows that the majority of the students have achieved the right answer to only half of the phrasal verb items. This is evident in that the test was not that easy and in fact such a score tended to correspond to their score on the TOEFL and the FCE tests.

2 Bivariate (zero order) correlations

It is clear in Table 3 that the phrasal verb scores are significantly inter-correlated with all the variables tested. In fact they are of a high magnitude ($p < .01$), particularly sections one and three of the TOEFL and the TOEFL total score ($r = .51$, $r = .58$ and $r = .57$ respectively) and with the students' GPA ($r = .50$). However, section 2 yielded a low correlation ($r = .37$). The reason for this is obvious. Section 2 of the Toefl test examines various grammatical items which are not very much directly related to the learning of phrasal verbs.

Table 3: Bivariate correlation coefficients among all scores, Grade Point Average (GPA)

		section 1	section 2	section 3	total	FCE	Cloze	GPA	Phrasal verbs
TOEFL	Section 1	—							
	Section 2	.48	—						
	Section 3	.64	.49	—					
	Total score	.80	.81	.85	—				
FCE		.47	.62	.48	.62	—			
Cloze		.37*	.53	.42	.56	.47	—		
GPA		.63	.62	.51	.63	.62	.47	—	
Phrasal verbs		.51	.37	.58	.57	.43	.42	.50	—

* This value is not statistically significant at 0.01 level

3 Multivariate correlations

Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the stepwise regression predicting students' acquisition of phrasal verbs, respectively, using the component scores of the TOEFL and the FCE as independent variables. Note that the phrasal verb score contributed more than the cloze to the prediction of students' TOEFL scores to be maintained in the linear model. The same appears to be true with regard to the FCE scores in the linear model (0.5 probability criterion was utilized).

Table 4: Stepwise regression of Phrasal verb scores and cloze on to the overall TOEFL (forward selection)

	Entry Order	Independent Variables	Partial r-square
TOEFL	1	Phrasal verbs	.33
	2	Cloze	.11
Total r – square			.44

Prediction equation: $Y = 331.68 + 5.49 X_1 + 7.29 X_2$

Y = TOEFL score X_1 = Phrasal Verbs score

score X_2 = Cloze score

Table 5: Stepwise regression of Phrasal verb scores and cloze on to the overall FCE (forward selection)

	Entry Order	Independent Variables	Partial r-square
FCE	1	Phrasal verbs	.17
	2	Cloze	.05
Total r – square			.22

Prediction equation: $Y = 52.40 + .87 X_1 + 1.00 X_2$

$Y =$ FCE score
 $X_1 =$ Phrasal Verbs score
 $X_2 =$ Cloze score

Discussion

The theoretical rationale for having considered phrasal verbs as predictors of language attainment or academic performance is that the majority of Arab learners of English often express their fear while learning phrasal verbs because they would always confront difficulties with identifying, knowing and ultimately using the right phrasal verbs. Secondly, phrasal verb items and exercises are normally found at the end of most grammar reference books. An obvious reason for this is that phrasal verb materials include most grammar items, i.e. tenses, prepositions, passive, etc. and thus cannot be introduced to the students once they embark on learning the language. And most importantly is the Arabic language does not have phrasal verbs as such. For a learner of English to be fully acquainted with the understanding of phrasal verbs, he needs to get himself totally assimilated in the culture of the target language. Only advanced learners of English are capable of attaining such a language stage.

Results of this study show that the students' scores on the phrasal verb test are highly correlated with their scores on the

TOEFL and the FCE total scores and also with the cloze section on the FCE. It appears that at upper levels of language learning, students' success in language learning is determined by their lexical and syntactic knowledge in reading comprehension together with their ability in understanding and producing correct phrasal verb structures. The more proficient they are in these two language components, the higher their performance is in the exam. This is found to be true for students approaching their graduation year at the University. At this stage, the more proficient they are in the language, the more they can be identified as bilingual students who are capable of using phrasal verbs.

The findings of this study suggest that students' proficiency in English is determined by both their performance on phrasal verb tests and on certain components of the FCE exam particularly the cloze. Since the scores of the FCE Cloze and phrasal verb sections were found to yield less correlational magnitude with the students' academic performance at the University, more reading passages with ample phrasal verb exercises need to be incorporated in all EFL courses as a required component. In this respect McArther and Atkins (1995:5) state that the students' misunderstanding of phrasal verbs is aggravated by the lack of a good description of phrasal verbs and by a shortage of useful teaching materials.

One major pedagogical outcome of this study is that the value phrasal verbs as a test instrument should not be underestimated. Since this study has revealed the significance of phrasal verb tests, educational practitioners need to adopt pedagogical strategies by which these components can be better enhanced in the learning process. It is evident that phrasal verbs together with the Cloze of the FCE, have signified the importance of developing adequate knowledge of lexical and syntactic abilities in reading comprehension. As far as students' knowledge of English grammar is concerned, teachers of English should develop in their students the language skills that will make them more proficient in adopting better analytical thinking while attempting to comprehend the underlying structures of most common principles of English grammar. This

means that their entire approach to teaching the language is to be reviewed.

Dwaik (1997) conducted a study on the role of lexical and syntactic knowledge in English as a foreign language reading comprehension. A series of correlational analyses was used to determine the relationship between lexical and syntactic knowledge and students' reading comprehension of English as a foreign language (TOEFL). The results of the study showed significant correlations between lexical and syntactic knowledge with reading comprehension. Results of the step-wise regression analyses of the present study have further supported those obtained by Dwaik (1997).

The pedagogical outcome derived from the above is that teachers of English, particularly those involved in teaching phrasal verbs in ESL learning environments, should develop in their students the ability to comprehend phrasal verbs as they are used in authentic texts of advanced reading passages. If their success in the language courses is determined by this, their English language teachers should provide them with adequate reading texts which aim at enhancing their reading skills and enabling them to reach that of native-speakers' reading strategies. It would be advisable if most commonly used phrasal verbs are incorporated in EFL materials at an early language programme so as to give the students the chance to become more acquainted with them afterwards. If such phrasal verbs are graded and employed effectively, the students' language performance can improve at later stages. Such integration could start at the sentence level when students are asked to produce simple sentences and structures. In addition, a great emphasis could be laid on oral communication and listening drills that include phrasal verbs. This will help the students improve their comprehension ability to understand the usage of phrasal verbs in oral communication. Moreover, the writing assignments may be geared towards certain tasks that promote usage and production of phrasal verbs. Finally, corpus linguistic data may work as an effective tool for investigating students' interest in comprehending and predicting proper meanings of phrasal verbs when used in contexts. It is worth pointing out that nowadays the internet is loaded

with plenty of EFL exercises that include exercises and drills on phrasal verbs which are meant to encourage students to recognize and produce phrasal verb structures correctly.

To the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has been attempted to measure the standardization of phrasal verbs as a form of language tests and also to measure their prediction of students' academic success in EFL or ESL. The results of this study have certainly signified the importance of phrasal verbs in relation to other standardized form of tests. It can thus be maintained that a test of certain common phrasal verbs can be considered to be as reliable and predictive as any other standardized form of tests and that their value in test measurement should never be underestimated. Certainly the present study has not been intended to provide a sound justification for recommending the use of phrasal verbs as a substitute for either the TOEFL or the FCE. These tests comprise a fairly representative sample of the universality of language elements but not the phrasal verb test. These tests have also been used for a long time and in many academic institutions all over the world which can certainly be considered to be truly valid instruments. The present paper adds a new dimension to language testing in that a test on a number of commonly known phrasal verbs can also act as a predictor of students' attainment to certain extent. This fact leads EFL practitioners to pay attention to phrasal verbs as essential language items which need to be fully incorporated in EFL materials preferably at earlier stages together with other essential grammar items. In doing so, all language items should receive full attention in teaching and learning. The incorporation of phrasal verbs in high school curricular will lead us to be concerned about the total picture of learners' proficiency as a whole.

A number of issues related to language testing have emerged from the findings of this study which form a significant basis for future studies in similar fields. It will be interesting, for example, to undertake comparative studies on the measurement of prediction of various standardised EFL or ESL to students' academic success. Similar studies can also be undertaken to examine the prediction of such tests to success in EFL at various levels of lan-

guage learning and with various types of learners. Such an approach to future research may reveal more significant findings which will contribute to better understanding of language tests.

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