

On how to solve the problem of the avoidance of phrasal verbs in the Chinese context

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This article discusses the reasons why Chinese learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs in an English community context or when using English as an inter-language in China. The avoidance of phrasal verbs often leads to ineffective communication. By adopting appropriate pedagogical and methodological approaches or providing proper guidance to learning, Chinese learners of English may achieve the goal of using phrasal verbs appropriately in the context of English as an international language in China.

Phrasal verbs; avoidance, oral communication, Chinese context

INTRODUCTION

A phrasal verb is a phrase which consists of a verb in combination with a preposition or adverb or both, the meaning of which is different from the meaning of its separate parts: 'look after', 'work out' and 'make up for' are all phrasal verbs (Koprowski, 2005). The most common English phrasal verbs are as important as other more frequent phrases during the process of English learning. Phrasal verbs play rather an indispensable role in communication particularly in oral forms. Native speakers of English tend to use phrasal verbs in everyday conversation and generally reserve one-word verbs (i.e. 'investigate' instead of 'look into') for more formal occasions such as business letters (About, Inc., 2007). Moreover, native speakers of English, like Chinese learners of English, tend to avoid using phrasal verbs when communicating in the foreign language (Liao & Fukuya, 2003).

In addition, a survey (Chen, 2005) involving 300 subjects in a regular university in China clearly showed the avoidance of English phrasal verbs. The subjects were 240 non-English major students and 60 English major students with different academic levels. The survey indicated two important findings. One finding was that they were not deliberately avoiding phrasal verbs but they had a relatively weak understanding of the body of English vocabulary. For example, many students knew the meaning of such difficult words as 'accomplish', 'extinguish' and 'tolerate' but they had difficulty in identifying the contextualized meanings of the phrasal verbs like 'carry through', 'put out' or 'put up with'. The other finding was that they often preferred one-word vocabularies to phrasal verbs no matter when phrasal verbs were more appropriate in the context.

These findings imply various problems in the teaching of English in education systems in China. In the internationalization and globalization of the world, English is becoming an international language in the Chinese setting (Xu, 2002) so that effective and efficient teaching is more pressing and crucial than ever before in the field of English language education in China. This article identifies the most common English phrasal verbs and 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. In the concluding section some recommendations are provided to help solve the problem of the avoidance of phrasal verbs in the Chinese context.

AVOIDANCE ANALYSIS

There are various factors contributing to the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners. They are related to societal factors, institutional factors, teacher and learner factors as well as ineffective curriculum documents.

First, the lack of a long existing foreign language environment is likely to be the most important factor to cause the problem of the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners. They are exposed to very few opportunities for English communication except where there are some opportunities provided to practise English in the classroom. In the meantime classroom English and everyday English are more often than not employing different discourses. The words the English learners have learnt at school can rarely be put into immediate use and practice outside the classroom. Lack of practice and individually spaced repetition, that is the opposite of massed repetition, on topics related to everyday life is likely to result in ineffective or less confident communication even though the relevant language knowledge has been taught in the classroom (Nation, 2001). However, research evidence shows that communicative practice in the classroom is not sufficient to lead learners to a high degree of fluency and accuracy in all aspects of language production (Lightbown, 2000). As one of the most important parts of communication (Hoey, 2005), phrasal verbs that are usually employed by native speakers cannot be used and are often avoided by the Chinese learners of English due to the foreign language environment. A foreign language context leads to the situation in which the language learners are exposed to so little real or authentic context that it is exceptionally difficult for them to have a good command of English phrasal verbs. Moreover, the author is not arguing that a good mastery of phrasal verbs is the only important feature of learning the language well. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that phrasal verbs, especially those commonly used ones, are very important components in effectively spoken communication no matter in what kind of language community context it lies. From the angle of language learning for the sake of effective communication phrasal verbs should by no means be avoided.

Second, the foreign language learning context and the development of economy largely influence the design of the curriculum in relation to language teaching and learning. In past decades English to a great extent belonged to a small number of people who learned the language for the sake of reading English documents. Therefore, the College English Curriculum (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1988) clearly indicated the purposes of learning and relevant learning outcomes, that had remained the same over a couple of decades. Consequently communication skills were largely ignored in the curriculum. The situation did not change until more and more educators and teachers became aware of the importance of communication especially oral communication with the rapid development of China's economy and the growth of China's international status in the world.

An increasing number of foreign investors including many international enterprises are flowing into the Chinese market and therefore the English language is becoming the *lingua franca* with the trend of an English education becoming essential for a globalising career in almost all industries. There is a wide agreement among educators that the concept of learning English for the purpose of reading materials can by no means meet the needs of this dramatic social and linguistic change (Wu, 2001). Many employers complain that graduates who have passed College English Tests (which is a nationwide examination usually used to gauge the English level of its examinees) are unable to handle even simple situations for communicating with clients who speak English only. It is high time to reform the English education curriculum. With the efforts and help of many English educators, administrators and experts, new College English Teaching Requirements (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic China, 2004) have been produced. A distinguishable difference from the former one lies in the emphasis on listening and speaking. Communication skills are put in an exceptionally prominent place. There is, therefore, evidence that English phrasal verbs, that are important components in communication, need to be emphasized in English language teaching and learning.

Third, in an age when English is for reading comprehension and understanding some materials written in English with a sizable vocabulary is clearly required and is probably essential, but it cannot be overemphasized otherwise the Chinese learners would be seriously misled. Even when English is regarded as an international language in China, a huge number of learners take it for granted that without a considerable vocabulary size, that is commonly about 4000 words according to CET-4, effective language learning cannot proceed. This idea is unarguable in terms of understanding a relatively difficult text, but this view needs to be changed if learners are going to converse on some common topics in English, because there is some mismatch between the vocabulary required for reading and conversational discourse (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2002). In addition, the body of learners tends to exclude that part of vocabulary that consists of more than one single word including phrasal verbs. As a matter of fact, the misconception among the Chinese learners of English is a misunderstanding of the vocabulary size required for different functions. To make matters worse, there has been an overemphasis on vocabulary among learners, that can be seen in the fact that an overwhelming majority of undergraduates possess a vocabulary dictionary. It is not exaggerating to say that much of their time involved in learning English is being occupied by memorising the so-called required words instead of those most commonly used phrasal verbs. It should be noted that those phrasal verbs are widely used because of their characteristics of flexibility, practicality, adaptability and efficiency for oral communication. Therefore, phrasal verbs should be given a greater emphasis than before with the goal of achieving effective and efficient communication in the English speech community rather than the use of those much more academic words. What is more important, there is much less room for those academic words in oral communication than in written communication.

Fourth, another peripheral reason that leads to the avoidance of English phrasal verbs is the lack of appropriate educational resources for oral communication. On the one hand, most teachers do not see the need for developing their own materials for students. Moreover, their diverging efforts have not been united in such tasks. On the other hand, the highly commercialized book market, apparently driven by huge profits, consequently produces a large number of low quality educational resources (Li, 2004). There are very few resources that cater for the needs of learning a language. The weak points in producing customer tailored teaching and learning materials together with the large book market lead to relatively few high quality resources including most of those available for English education. Incidentally, there are fewer educational resources in relation to learning and teaching English phrasal verbs or how, by using appropriate phrasal verbs, it is possible to achieve effective communication. They are usually collected by being picked up from the curriculum without identifying whether they are suitable for written or oral form of communication or roughly by being put together without being clearly interpreted. In addition, 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 learning can never be guaranteed.

Last but not least, Chinese learners of English have been greatly influenced by their mother language, Chinese, in the process of learning the foreign language, English. In both ancient and modern Chinese, there are quite a few words or phrases that have the same composition as English phrasal verbs – a main verb plus one or more particles. For example, the two Chinese characters '*renshou*' share their single but very similar meaning of 'tolerate' in the ancient Chinese language whereas in the modern Chinese it is a combination with the single meaning 'tolerate'. '*Ren*' and '*shou*' are both two verbs in ancient Chinese but only one word in modern Chinese. In order to make things clearer, in English 'tolerate' may sometimes be expressed in the form of a phrasal verb 'put (main verb) up with' but in Chinese '*renshou*' can never be interpreted in a similar way. Apparently, the composition in L1 and L2 is completely different. The word '*panwang*' can also illustrate the same issue. '*Pan*' and '*wang*', two Chinese verbs, share the meaning 'look' in ancient Chinese but in modern Chinese the combination means 'expect' or 'look forward to'. '*Fu*' means 'again' but '*xi*' means study in ancient Chinese while in modern Chinese the word '*Fuxi*' means 'review' or 'go over'. In reality the Chinese learners of

English are influenced by the design features of the modern Chinese language (Liu, 2003); 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 of a phrasal verb (e.g. 'put up with'), even on the occasions when phrasal verbs are more idiomatic or authentic than one-word equivalents.

SOLUTIONS

The issue of avoidance of English phrasal verbs among Chinese learners of English is complicated because it involves many factors as mentioned above. They may be generalized into six major aspects, namely, objective context, curriculum problem, internalized ineffective learning concepts and habits, educational resource development, teaching methodology and L1 impact on L2 learning. In order to help solve this problem, some suggestions are provided below.

First, it is necessary to reconsider the following *cliché* questions in the context of English as an international language in China so that people may be able to reorientate English education.

Question 1: What is English learning for millions of Chinese undergraduates?

In order to answer the question it is necessary to know the learners' motivation of learning the foreign language. As indicated in Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2003), the predominant motivation of 80 percent of the Chinese learners of English is purely to gain a certificate. In other words, they learn the language in order to pass examinations, particularly CET, and to obtain the diploma (graduate diploma). This is because CET-4 certificate is an indispensable condition to obtain a graduate diploma in most universities of China. This motivation, strictly speaking, is a sub-type instrumental motivation. According to Gao et al (2003), the other motivations can be classified as cultural and situational ones. Cultural motivation is related to the learners' cultural interests and concerns while situational motivation is independent of the other two motivation types, indicating the influence of the learning environment. Having a clear picture of the motivation types of Chinese undergraduates is useful in order to adopt sound educational ways to achieve more effective curriculum design.

Question 2: What learning outcomes will English education gain?

The reformed College English Curriculum of 2004 is a very important guideline, that manifests the learning outcomes in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. But listening and speaking are emphasized and the learners are expected to be able to understand what English speakers are saying and at the same time to be able to carry out productive communication with them. However, reading and writing are not the focus of this article, hence they are not discussed here.

Question 3: What vocabulary is more efficient for the learning outcomes?

Since oral communication is particularly emphasized in the curriculum document, and since the goal is to achieve the learning outcomes, it is necessary to identify the base vocabulary that is required. Alternatively, what is the threshold vocabulary size for effective oral communication? Is the CET vocabulary equally effective to speaking and reading? According to discourse theory, speaking and reading utterances often belong to different discourses. Therefore, it is necessary to regroup the vocabulary that is effective for oral communication and identify the vocabulary size. However, it is first of all necessary to know the difference between the old and new outcomes and the different vocabulary caused by different learning outcomes required in the curriculum documents. In order to understand what is involved, it is necessary to identify what phrasal verbs are base ones for oral speaking purposes.

In addition to the reconsideration of the questions above, some ways of solving the problem of high quality educational resources with respect to English phrasal verbs must be investigated. Some possible ways are to organize some experienced teachers to undertake a collaborative

project pertaining to the topic involving the development of school-based material. This educational resource development initially must cater for the learners' needs and be easy to memorize, and be adaptable in communicative situations. The material is likely to need to be updated to meet the needs of linguistic development for its small-scale publication and limited use. Another way may be through the cooperation of outstanding teachers with a reputable publishing house. There must be some compromises between the two parties for various reasons but as long as the work is good for the learning of English phrasal verbs it is worthwhile undertaking the task. Perhaps it is necessary to recommend that some foreign materials are adopted to realize the authentic learning of English.

Besides, teachers should hold positive attitudes with respect to teaching methods. There are no best methods in education, particularly with respect to English phrasal verbs (Prabhu, 1990). However, effective methods need to be explored in the Chinese context. Direct instruction on learning strategies needs to be provided over time. Some innovative and creative approaches are very welcome. In order to test new approaches, teachers may have to spend more time and energy in doing relevant research. Consequently, there is a lot to do in this field. For this particular area, it is advisable to probe the methods that are related to learning and teaching English vocabulary. Hunt and Beglar (2005) provide some ideas for teachers. The author also wishes to elaborate her approaches to the teaching of English phrasal verbs, namely the downward and upward approach. This is an approach to teach English phrasal verbs whose meanings are familiar to the learners and it is stressed that almost every common English phrasal verb consists of particular words that the learners must be very familiar with. Doing so initially makes the learners feel that phrasal verbs involve nothing difficult and they can be more confident to learn them well. This is a psychological strategy. This is the so-called downward approach. After that, the upward approach can be used, namely to introduce the meanings that are closely related to daily communication. Various meanings can be gradually added to each item. The purpose of doing so is to help the learners to become aware of the powerful service provided through oral communication. Given that some learners may like to challenge something new, and may feel bored to learn the phrases with their familiar components, some equivalent forms may be introduced in an appropriate way to make sure the learners are not overloaded with new ideas. This approach is especially suitable only when the vocabulary size for oral communication has been lowered down to a certain level where the learners do not have to memorize so many inapplicable words for use in speaking situations. There must be many other different methods in this field, that must be explored by interested teachers and educators.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary impetus for discussing the avoidance of English phrasal verbs has been my experience and study in 2005 and although vocabulary education is of major concern of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the problem of avoidance is frequently undervalued by English teachers and instructors. However, the details of the reasons for avoidance and suggestions to resolve this problem continue to give rise to controversy. I still believe that there is need to discuss the negative impact of the problem and considerable reform of College English vocabulary education needs to be urgently launched. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that further study remains to be undertaken. The questions to be addressed are (a) The threshold vocabulary size for oral communication needs further study and investigation; (b) If the phrasal verbs that are commonly used in English countries are the same as in Chinese context, what are those that the Chinese learners need? There has been little research undertaken into the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners in the foreign context and this is a systematic project that requires efforts made from many different directions.

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