

The Problem of Using English Phrasal Verbs among Third-Year Students in the Department of English Language Faculty of Education, university of Kordofan (2025-2026)

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Abstract

The present study was carried out in University of Kordofan, during 2025-2026. The study aimed to investigate the adversity of understanding and using of English Language Phrasal verbs (PVs) and Clarify the avoidance of using phrasal verbs (PVs) due to difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases besides viewing the phrasal verbs (PVs) structure and its syntactic and semantic characteristics. Descriptive analytical method was used. Questionnaire and observation check list were conducted as primary sources for collecting the data. The sample compromised 40 tertiary students who represent 32% from the study population of 250 in university of Kordofan post-graduate students who have been selected through Simple random sampling techniques and 20 English language teachers were selected by purposive sampling techniques in university of Kordofan, Faculty of Education and Arts for observation checklist, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS – V-16) was used to analyze the data. The results reveal that, 92.5% of respondents stated that, Students at tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs. It was concluded that, Students at tertiary level face obstacles in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs due to Phrasal verbs should be systematically incorporated into English curricula at the tertiary level, with explicit objectives for both receptive and productive skills. The study recommended that, Teachers should emphasize teaching PVs in meaningful contexts (dialogues, stories, role plays) rather than isolated lists

to improve retention and applicability. Universities should integrate corpus based resources and authentic input (films, podcasts, and native texts) to expose learners to natural use of PVs. Students should be encouraged to keep personal vocabulary notebooks, practice paraphrasing, and engage in self-assessment to monitor PV learning.

Key terms: Phrasal Verbs, (PVs) – Syntactic and Semantic Structure – Word Structure – Phrase.

مشاكل استخدام الافعال المركبة لدي طلاب السنة الثالثة بقسم اللغة الانجليزية بكلية التربية جامعة كردفان (6202-5202)

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المستخلص

أُجريت هذه الدراسة في جامعة كردفان، خلال العامين الدراسيين 2025-2026، بهدف دراسة صعوبات فهم واستخدام الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب المرحلة الجامعية. هدفت الدراسة إلى دراسة صعوبات فهم واستخدام الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية، وتوضيح أسباب تجنب استخدامها نظراً لصعوبة تركيبها وعدم ثباته، بالإضافة إلى دراسة تركيب الأفعال المركبة وخصائصها النحوية والدلالية. اتبعت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، واستخدمت الاستبيان وقائمة المراقبة كمصدرين رئيسيين لجمع البيانات. شملت العينة 40 طالباً وطالبة من طلاب التعليم العالي، أي ما نسبته 32% من مجتمع الدراسة البالغ عددهم 250 طالباً وطالبة من طلاب الدراسات العليا بجامعة كردفان، والذين تم اختيارهم من خلال أساليب أخذ العينات العشوائية البسيطة، كما تم اختيار 20 مدرساً ومعلمة لغة إنجليزية من خلال أساليب أخذ العينات القصدية في جامعة كردفان، كلية التربية والآداب، لقائمة التحقق من الملاحظة، وتم استخدام الحزمة الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية (SPSS – V-16) لتحليل البيانات. تكشف النتائج أن 92.5% من المستجيبين أفادوا بأن الطلاب في المستوى العالي يواجهون صعوبات في فهم واستخدام أفعال العبارة في اللغة الإنجليزية، وخلص إلى أن الطلاب في المستوى العالي يواجهون عقبات في فهم واستخدام الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية بسبب أنه يجب دمج الأفعال المركبة بشكل منهجي في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية في المستوى العالي، مع أهداف واضحة لكل من المهارات الاستقبالية والإنتاجية. أوصت الدراسة بأنه يجب على المعلمين التأكيد على تدريس الأفعال المركبة في سياقات ذات معنى (الحوارات والقصص وتمثيل الأدوار) بدلاً من القوائم المعزولة لتحسين الاحتفاظ بها وإمكانية التطبيق. يجب على الجامعات دمج الموارد القائمة على مجموعة من النصوص والمدخلات الأصيلة (الأفلام والبودكاست والنصوص الأصلية) لتعريض المتعلمين للاستخدام الطبيعي للأفعال المركبة. يجب تشجيع الطلاب على الاحتفاظ بدفاتر المفردات الشخصية وممارسة إعادة الصياغة والمشاركة في التقييم الذاتي لمراقبة تعلم الأفعال المركبة.

المصطلحات: الافعال المركبة – خصائص التراكيب النحوية والدلالية – تراكيب الكلمة – العبارة

1. Introduction

Native English speakers are found to use regularly phrasal verbs in speaking English language. Phrasal verbs are verbs which carry a specific meaning which cannot be referred to by analyzing the meaning of its constituent words. They are slightly found in the Arabic language. Nevertheless, phrasal verbs are a vital part of English language vocabulary and are a basic part of this language's history, heritage and culture. Phrasal verbs are extremely important in English verbal communication; therefore English native speakers use phrasal verbs when they communicate spontaneously and daily. In linguistic studies, it is argued that phrasal verbs add flavor and taste to communication and speech. Thus, learning to understand and use phrasal verbs is necessary in order to achieve native like English language communication. Nevertheless, learning the meaning of phrasal verbs and proper use of them is not as easy as one might think. English language students and learners usually lack the ability to understand the meaning of phrasal verbs when communicating in the English language and find it difficult to communicate using phrasal verbs properly and efficiently. Most English language learners, especially Arabic mother tongue speakers find phrasal verbs to be extremely difficult and uneasy, unlike native English speakers, who use them subconsciously and almost every day. Recognizing the meanings of phrasal verbs, which are commonly used in the English language as well as being capable of using phrasal verbs, should be, regarded an essential part of English learning at the second language despite this, however, phrasal verbs are found to be among the most foreign language learning difficulties. Since phrasal verbs are an integral part of English, their essential feature of English language is utilized in everyday native speakers. English language learners face difficulties in the process to comprehend and use phrasal verbs; their main obstacle is the native's communication using phrasal verbs. Learners will encounter phrasal verbs in authentic. This study is significant due to its first investigation in university of Kordofan, faculty of education, department of English language and by trying to Investigating the Adversity of Comprehending and Using English Language Phrasal Verbs (PVs) among Students at Tertiary Level. Furthermore, it can help syllabus designers and curricula makers to design suitable syllables by us-

ing this study which help nonnative English language learners improve their English language skills. The study can also be a motive for the researchers carry on further studies in these areas.

2. Statement of the Problem

Phrasal verbs (PVs) are a modern problematic linguistics issue needs to identify, as it is noticed that, native English language speakers are capable of using phrasal verbs in daily life speaking and authentic materials while ESL learners avoid using them due to difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases e.g. verb + preposition, verb + particle, separable and inseparable, compositional and non-compositional in addition to the lack of knowledge and complexity of phrasal verbs structure. Therefore, the researcher aims to investigate the problem of using phrasal verbs (PVs) among third-year students and the reasons for avoidance.

3. Objectives of the study

The study is purposed to achieve the followings objectives:

1. Investigating the problem of using English language Phrasal verbs(PVs) among Third-Year Students in The Department of English Language.
2. Clarifying the avoidance of using phrasal verbs (PVs) due to difficult and unfixed structure of the phrases.
3. Viewing the phrasal verbs (PVs) structure and its syntactic and semantic characteristics.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Phrasal Verbs

A phrasal verb consists of a verb combined with one or more particles (prepositions or adverbs), resulting in a meaning that is often not transparent from its parts. For instance, the verb “give up” means “to quit,” which is semantically unrelated to either “give” or “up” in isolation. This semantic shift is what makes many phrasal verbs idiomatic. Celle Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999; p. 412) stated that, Phrasal verbs constitute a distinctive and often challenging feature of the English language, particularly for nonnative speakers. Their idiomatic nature, syntactic flexibility, and semantic opacity render them a focal point of both linguistic inquiry and language pedagogy. “Phrasal verbs

are among the most problematic areas of English grammar for learners due to their unpredictable meanings and complex structural patterns.” This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the typology of phrasal verbs and to explore the multifaceted difficulties learners encounter in their acquisition and use. By synthesizing insights from grammarians, applied linguists, and language educators, this paper elucidates the categorization of phrasal verbs and contextualizes the cognitive and pedagogical challenges they present.

4.2. Challenges in Using Phrasal Verbs

While comprehension of phrasal verbs presents its own set of challenges, the productive use of these multi word expressions especially in speaking and writing is often even more problematic for tertiary level students. This section explores the nature of these difficulties, analyzing how learners struggle to integrate phrasal verbs into active language production, and the implications this has on communicative competence and academic writing.

4.3. Avoidance in Speaking Due to Insecurity or Uncertainty

Many learners deliberately avoid using phrasal verbs in speech because of insecurity about their proper usage. This phenomenon, known as lexical avoidance, is well documented in second language acquisition research. Hulstijn and Marchena (1989, p. 248) found that Dutch learners of English routinely opted for single word synonyms (e.g., “enter” instead of “go in”) in oral tasks. The avoidance strategy is often employed to minimize the risk of error, even when learners are familiar with the phrasal verb’s meaning. This hesitance leads to unnatural sounding speech that may be grammatically correct but lacks idiomaticity. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2008, p. 38) note, such avoidance can stigmatize L2 speakers as overly formal or robotic in conversational settings.

5. Research Method

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative research design complemented by qualitative classroom observation. The quantitative component was implemented through a structured questionnaire, facilitates statistical analysis of students’ comprehension levels, usage frequency,

and learning strategies. The qualitative observation enriches the data by providing contextual insights into classroom interactions and pedagogical practices related to phrasal verbs. This mixed methods approach enables both breadth and depth in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The target population comprises 200 undergraduate students enrolled in English language and linguistics programs at the tertiary level. These students have typically completed courses in grammar, reading, and vocabulary areas where phrasal verbs are frequently encountered. The population also includes a subset of language instructors who provided context during the observational phase. From the population, a sample of 40 students was selected using the simple random sampling technique. This method was chosen to ensure objectivity and to provide each student with an equal chance of participation. The sample size is considered statistically adequate for descriptive analysis and ensures manageability for in depth observation.

6. Data analysis and discussion

Table No. (6.1) Students at tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs.

| Options | Number | Percentage |
|-------------|--------|------------|
| Agree | 37 | % 92.5 |
| Disagree | 1 | % 2.5 |
| Not sure | 2 | % 5.0 |
| Total | 40 | % 100 |
| Chi square: | 63.05 | |

Table 6.1 reveals that a significant majority of respondents (92.5%, n=37) affirmed that students at the tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English phrasal verbs. In contrast, only 5% (n=2) disagreed, and 2.5% (n=1) remained uncertain. This finding reflects a deep rooted challenge where the structural complexity and idiomaticity of phrasal verbs impede learners' ability to grasp and apply them effectively, especially in academic and professional settings.

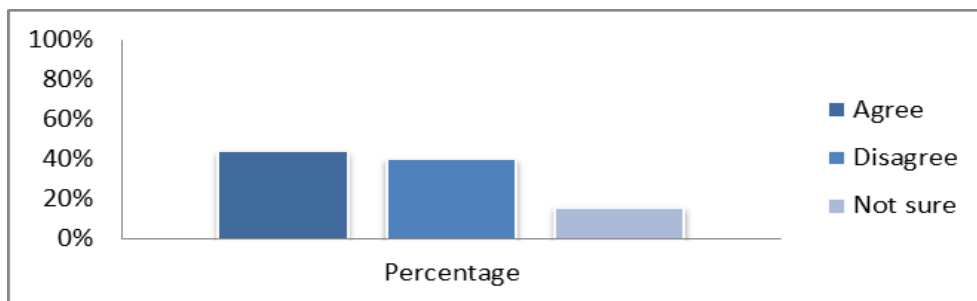


Figure No. (6.1) Students at tertiary level face difficulties in comprehending and using English language phrasal verbs.

Table No. (6.2) Students misunderstand of Phrasal verbs due to their idiomatic meanings/usage

| Options | Number | Percentage |
|------------|--------|------------|
| Agree | 30 | % 75.0 |
| Disagree | 6 | % 15.0 |
| Not sure | 4 | % 10.0 |
| Total | 40 | % 100 |
| Chi square | 31.04 | |

Table 6.2 indicates that 87.5% of respondents (n=35) agreed that students misunderstand phrasal verbs because of their idiomatic usage, while 7.5% (n=3) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were uncertain. This result underscores the inherent difficulty posed by non literal expressions in second language learning, where students struggle to derive meaning from structures that deviate from conventional grammatical logic.

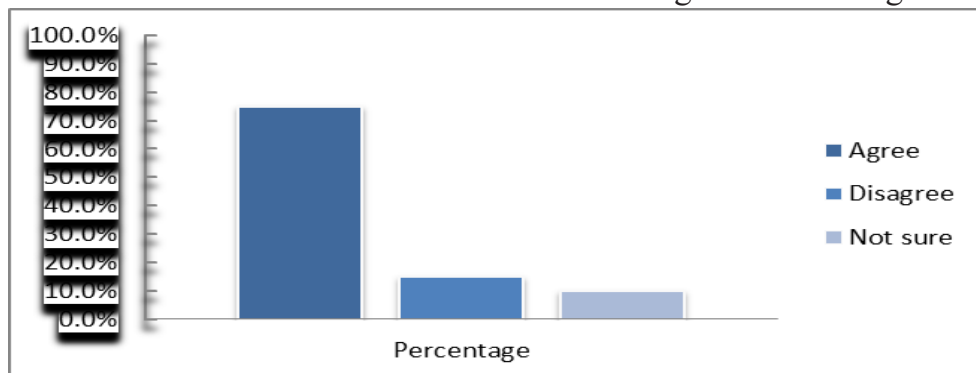


Figure No. (6.2) Students misunderstand of Phrasal verbs due to their idiomatic meanings/usage

Table No. (6.3) Many tertiary students face challenging to interpret phrasal verbs in reading materials.

| Options | Number | Percentage |
|------------|--------|------------|
| Agree | 30 | % 81.1 |
| Disagree | 4 | % 10.8 |
| Not sure | 3 | % 8.1 |
| Total | 37 | % 100 |
| Chi square | | 38.0 |

According to Table 6.3, a high proportion of respondents (90%, n=36) agreed that students face challenges interpreting phrasal verbs in reading materials. Meanwhile, 5% (n=2) disagreed, and another 5% (n=2) were not sure. This highlights how textual complexity, especially in academic reading, exacerbates learners' difficulty with phrasal verbs, often resulting in misinterpretation and reduced reading comprehension.

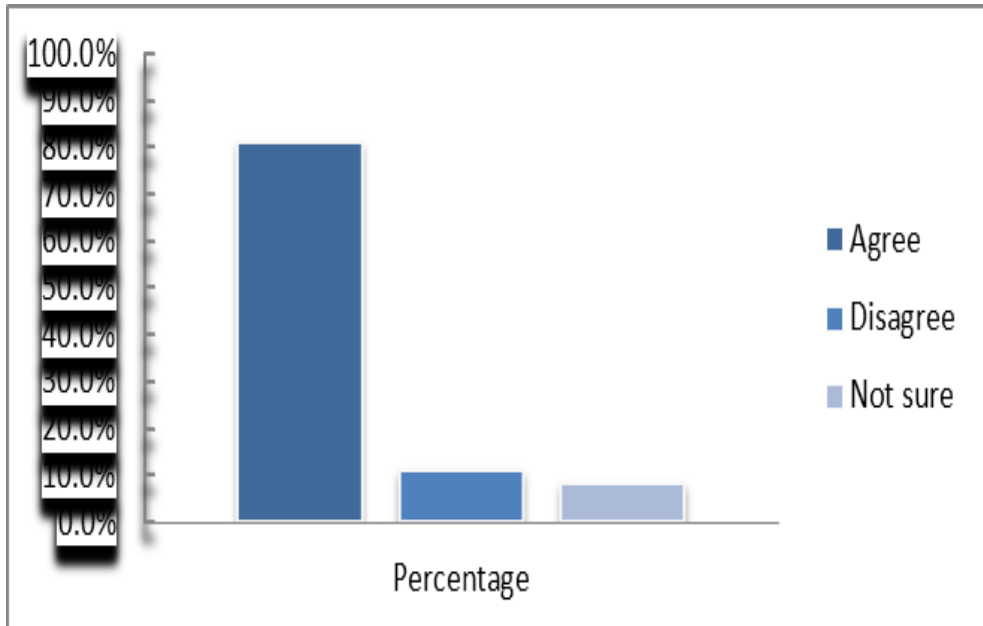


Figure No. (6.3) Many tertiary students face challenging to interpret phrasal verbs in reading materials.

Table No. (4 4) The multiple meanings of some phrasal verbs create confusion among learners.

| Options | Number | Percentage |
|-------------|--------|------------|
| Agree | 35 | % 87.5 |
| Disagree | 2 | % 5.0 |
| Not sure | 3 | % 7.5 |
| Total | 40 | % 100 |
| Chi square: | | 52.85 |

Table 4.4 shows that 85% of respondents (n=34) agreed that the multiple meanings of certain phrasal verbs confuse students, while 10% (n=4) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were not sure. This reflects a lexical ambiguity that impedes semantic clarity for learners, who often lack the contextual sensitivity required to distinguish among varied usages of a single verb particle combination.

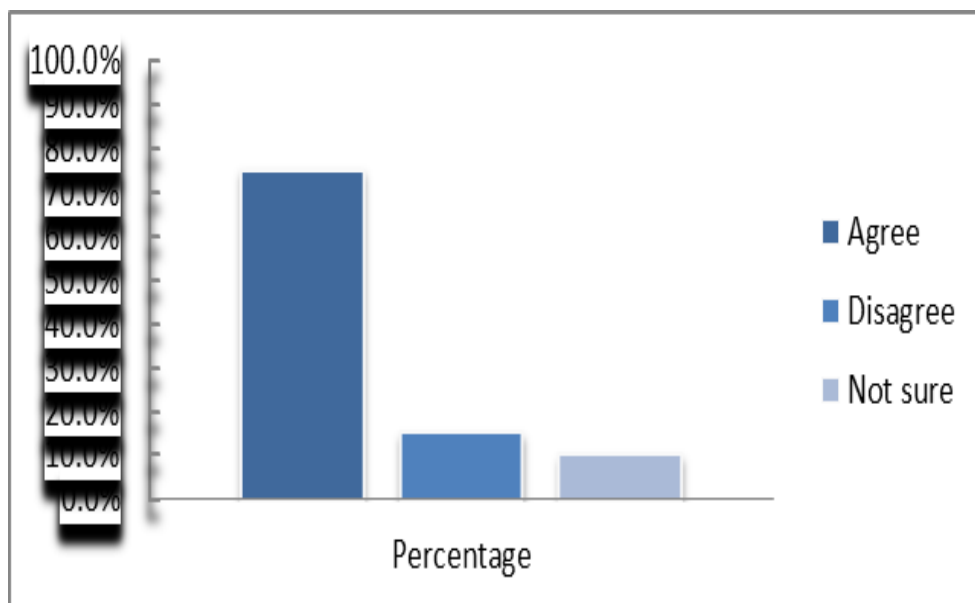


Figure No. (6.4) The multiple meanings of some phrasal verbs create confusion among learners.

Table No. (6.5) The difference between literal and figurative meanings of phrasal verbs is difficult to grasp.

| Options | Number | Percentage |
|-------------|--------|------------|
| Agree | 29 | 72.5% |
| Disagree | 4 | 10.0% |
| Not sure | 7 | 17.5% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |
| Chi square: | | 27.95 |

As shown in Table 6.5, the majority of respondents (87.5%, n=35) agreed that students struggle with distinguishing between literal and figurative meanings of phrasal verbs. In comparison, 7.5% (n=3) disagreed and 5% (n=2) were uncertain. This finding indicates that cognitive and linguistic constraints inhibit learners from transferring meaning across figurative contexts, resulting in limited comprehension and inaccurate usage.

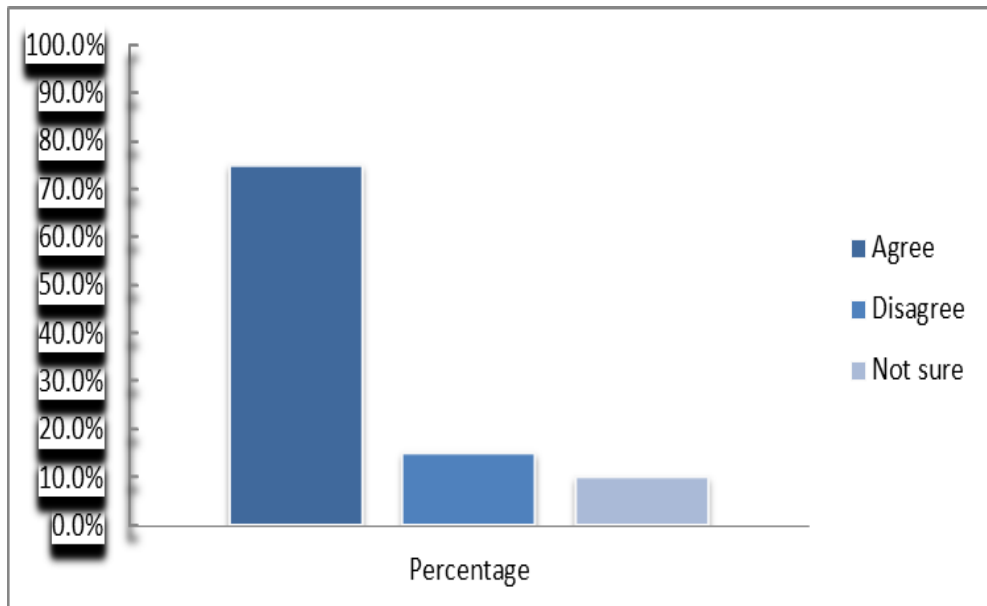


Figure No. (6.5) the difference between literal and figurative meanings of phrasal verbs is difficult to grasp.

8. Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the challenges that tertiary level students encounter in comprehending and using English phrasal verbs (PVs). The background established that phrasal verbs, though central to English communication, are among the most problematic aspects of English for EFL learners, particularly Arabic speaking students. They are difficult because of their syntactic variability, semantic opacity, idiomaticity, and multiple meanings. The statement of the problem identified avoidance of PVs, frequent misuse, and limited ability to integrate them into both spoken and written communication. The study aimed to answer specific research questions on the adversities students face in understanding and using PVs, the structural complexities involved, and the extent of learners' difficulties. The research employed a descriptive design with both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (classroom observation) instruments. Forty students were sampled, and data were analyzed using SPSS, with both descriptive and inferential statistics applied. The validity and reliability of instruments were confirmed. The literature review highlighted theoretical perspectives from interlanguage theory, cognitive linguistics, usage based models, the noticing hypothesis, and socio cultural theory. Prior studies confirmed that phrasal verbs pose a systemic difficulty for EFL learners due to semantic unpredictability, syntactic separability, L1 interference, and pragmatic inappropriateness. It also showed that traditional teaching methods are insufficient, and more contextualized, communicative, and corpus based approaches are required. Data analysis in Chapter Four revealed that an overwhelming majority of students struggle with phrasal verbs. Over 90% agreed that PVs are difficult to comprehend and use, with idiomaticity, multiple meanings, and differences between literal and figurative senses being major barriers. Many students misused PVs,

avoided them in speech and writing, or substituted them with single word synonyms. Limited exposure to authentic usage, insufficient curricular emphasis, and poor pedagogical approaches were identified as key contributing factors. Observational data further showed hesitation, avoidance, and anxiety when learners attempted to use PVs in classroom settings, though collaborative and context based activities improved engagement. In sum, the findings validate the hypotheses that phrasal verbs are difficult for EFL learners due to structural and semantic complexities, L1 interference, insufficient exposure, and weak pedagogical focus. The study contributes to the understanding of this challenge in Sudanese tertiary education and provides insights for curriculum developers, teachers, and learners.

7. Results

The major results of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. 92.5% of respondents reported facing difficulties in comprehending and using PVs, confirming that they are a persistent challenge for tertiary level learners.
2. 87.5% of students struggled with idiomatic meanings, and 85% found multiple meanings of PVs confusing. This confirms the semantic opacity of PVs as a key problem.
3. Over 72% of students reported difficulty distinguishing literal from figurative uses, leading to misinterpretation in both speech and reading.
4. 80% of respondents confused separable and inseparable PVs, resulting in structural errors in usage.
5. 90% of students exhibited low confidence in using PVs in academic contexts, with 85% reporting increased anxiety when required to use them.
6. Phrasal verbs should be systematically incorporated into English curricula at the tertiary level, with explicit objectives for both receptive and productive skills.

7. Teachers should emphasize teaching PVs in meaningful contexts (dialogues, stories, role plays) rather than isolated lists to improve retention and applicability.
8. Universities should integrate corpus based resources and authentic input (films, podcasts, native texts) to expose learners to natural use of PVs.
9. Instruction should combine explicit grammar teaching (separable/inseparable forms, transitivity) with communicative activities to develop both accuracy and fluency.

9. Acknowledgement

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