

## CONSIDERING PHRASAL VERBS AND COLLOCATIONS FOR ESL VOCABULARY TEACHING

Mempertimbangkan *Phrasal Verbs* Dan Kolokasi Untuk Pengajaran Perbendaharaan  
Kata Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua

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### ABSTRACT

Words have a habit of appearing in recurrent patterns. These recurring patterns may take the form of phrasal verbs, collocations, and other multi-word expressions (MWEs). Since these patterns constantly re-occur in both speech and writing, it would seem prudent to teach vocabulary to ESL learners in the manner in which words actually present themselves: in typical chunks. A common example of such a chunk would be “to deal with the problem”, in which “deal with” and “problem” are collocates. This paper contains three sections. The first examines what phrasal verbs and collocates are in the first place, and why they are particularly important for learners. The second part is a review of recent studies that support the teaching of MWEs and chunking pedagogy. This paper concludes by discussing the potential of incorporating chunking pedagogy in one’s own ESL vocabulary teaching.

*Keywords:* collocations, chunking vocabulary, explicit vocabulary teaching, Multi-Word Expressions (MWEs), phrasal verbs

### ABSTRAK

Perkataan dalam Bahasa Inggeris mempunyai corak berulang. Corak berulang ini boleh berupa kata kerja bergabung\*, kolokasi, dan *multi-word expressions* (MWE). Oleh kerana corak-corak tersebut sering bertimbul semula dalam pertuturan dan penulisan, pengajaran perbendaharaan kata kepada pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua secara “gumpal” boleh dikatakan sesuatu yang bijak kerana perbendaharaan kata dalam Bahasa Inggeris mempunyai unsur gumpal ini. Salah satu contoh bagi idea gumpal tersebut ialah *to deal with the problem*, di mana *deal with* dan *problem* ialah kolokasi. Kertas ini mengandungi tiga bahagian. Yang pertama mengkaji apa itu kata kerja bergabung\* dan kolokasi, serta mengapa dua perkara tersebut sangat penting bagi para pelajar. Kemudiannya, kertas ini melaporkan beberapa kertas kajian yang menyokong pengajaran MWE serta pedagogi “penggumpalan”. Kertas ini berakhir dengan perbincangan potensi untuk melibatkan pedagogi “penggumpalan” tersebut dalam pengajaran perbendaharaan kata Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua. *Kata kunci:* kolokasi, perbendaharaan kata secara gumpal, pengajaran perbendaharaan kata secara eksplisit, *Multi-Word Expressions* (MWE), kata kerja bergabung\*\*tiada istilah yang berpadan dengan *phrasal verb* dalam Bahasa Melayu.

*Kata kunci:* kolokasi, perbendaharaan kata secara gumpal, pengajaran perbendaharaan kata secara eksplisit, *Multi-Word Expressions* (MWE), kata kerja bergabung  
\*\*tiada istilah yang berpadan dengan *phrasal verb* dalam Bahasa Melayu

### 1. Introduction

Malaysian English language education has continually been placing an over-emphasis on teaching grammatical skills compared to communicative competence, which was studied by Che Musa, Lie, and Azman (2012). In that study, it was found that Primary to Secondary English language education prioritised developing grammar skills, instead of communicative competence, thus creating an exam-oriented culture.

It is argued that a re-alignment of focus is required. It is recommended that the emphasis be placed on teaching vocabulary, especially Multiple-Word Expressions (MWEs) like phrasal verbs and collocations, due to their sheer pervasiveness in the English language (Martinez, 2013).

“We know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957); words do not occur singly. Rather, words are used in recurrent patterns in highly predictable ways. Evidence from corpus linguistics has shown that language is mostly phrasal (Reppen & Simpson, 2002). Due to this phenomenon, teaching MWEs matched appropriately with discourse is argued to be of greater importance than merely teaching words in isolation.

Hence, as an effort to strengthen the argument for spending more time and resources on vocabulary teaching, this paper highlights the importance of teaching MWEs to ESL students by reviewing recent studies on this topic.

## **2. Multi-Word Expressions (MWEs)**

Two types of Multi-Word Expressions are highlighted in this paper: phrasal verbs and collocations. This is due to their ubiquitous nature in the English language.

Corpus linguistic data have conclusively proven that many MWEs occur in rather fixed grammatical patterns (Sivanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2014), such as the inclination to wish someone “good morning” instead of “fine morning”. Therefore, this highly predictable nature of MWEs is argued to help students notice recurring ways in which thoughts are expressed in English, in both form and meaning.

### **2.1. Phrasal verbs**

Phrasal verbs have traditionally been one of the most challenging aspects of language learning and teaching (Kurtyka, 2001; Side, 1990). Many have more than one meaning (literal and metaphorical) such as “put down”, so it appears that organizing phrasal verbs in teachable packages is a daunting task. To paint a clearer picture of the sheer presence of phrasal verbs in the English language, the Cambridge Phrasal Verbs Dictionary covers around 6000 phrasal verbs with their meanings (McCarthy, 2017).

### **2.2. Collocations**

In the field of lexicography, collocations are another type of MWE that is vastly present in the English language, and in fact, is the “central concern” for linguistic study (Clear, 1993).

Collocations are words that appear to occur naturally where we speak and write (Kennedy, 1990). Examples of collocations are “day” and “night”, “kick” and “bucket”, “deal with” and “problem”. Words such as “door” and “year” on the other hand, do not collocate strongly (Evert, 2008).

### **3. Review of recent experimental studies supporting the use of MWEs in vocabulary teaching**

The studies reviewed in this paper investigated phraseological (chunking) and cognitivist methods of teaching vocabulary. As a criterion, only experimental studies were to be reviewed in this paper.

The past two decades of investigating the use of MWEs to enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition and retention have accrued noteworthy findings, which support the convergence of corpus-driven, cognitivist, and chunking pedagogies.

#### **3.1. Samples**

The extant literature, as well as those featured in this paper, mostly employed the participation of university and secondary school students. There is a good reason for this since it has been acknowledged that cognitivist methods of teaching MWEs can be challenging for even advanced learners (Deignan, Gabryś, & Solska, 1997).

Thus far, while there is a steady stream of research continually showing that using MWEs is beneficial for teaching vocabulary explicitly among intermediate to advanced ESL/EFL learners, more investigation is required for adapting the methods discussed in this paper towards low proficiency and young learners.

#### **3.2. Cognitivist use of MWEs in experimental group treatments**

Cognitivist methods of using MWEs to teach vocabulary have featured treatments (the experimental groups) that facilitate the raising of the awareness of metaphors in the taught MWEs.

The goal for these cognitivist studies has been to investigate whether learners can retain their taught vocabulary more effectively by being aware that we make sense of reality, especially for abstract concepts like happiness, through metaphorical expressions. Even academic speech features metaphors (Simpson & Mendis, 2003), and it has been found that a lack of this metaphorical comprehension hampers the understanding of academic text (Beynen, 2020).

#### **3.3. Discussion of recent findings**

Deignan *et al.* (1997) investigated the use of cross-linguistic (Polish and English) activities to raise the metaphor awareness found in authentic texts. While no statistical evidence was provided, the authors noted that the exercises generated enjoyment and motivation to learn. That being said, the authors cautioned that lower proficiency students may not be equipped sufficiently to participate in the activities, which are demanding by the authors' own admission.

In Boers (2000), the author investigated through three distinct experiments, whether the experimental groups could retain their taught MWEs based on metaphoric themes (e.g. good is up; bad is down, as in cheer up; feel down), better than the control groups, which underwent conventional methods of teaching. The first two experiments showed that the cognitivist method was more effective than the conventional methods of teaching MWEs but

in the third experiment, which featured orientational phrasal verbs, e.g. *giving up*, the authors noted that the experimental and control groups performed similarly when novel MWEs were included in the test as a reference; the experimental group did not display an increase of metaphor awareness due to performing similarly with the control group. The authors posited that it could have been due to the fact that phrasal verbs can range from being quite easily understandable at face value (transparent), to being very opaque in meaning, such as in *to be fed up with*.

Beréndi, Csábi, & Kovecses (2008) reported three experiments as well on using conceptual metaphors for vocabulary teaching. However, only the first experiment is discussed in this paper as it is the only one featuring phrasal verbs. The goal of this first experiment was to ascertain the extent to which the participants were able to differentiate between the polysemous words *hold* and *keep*. The control group received conventional chalkboard teaching with native language translations of the phrasal verbs, while the experimental group was taught phrasal verbs using conceptual metaphors, along with visual aids on the blackboard. A strict marking scheme (accurate in form) entailed a marginally significant result at the immediate test for both groups ( $p=.043$ ), while the posttest revealed no statistical significance between the two groups ( $p=.062$ ). However, when the scoring was lenient, in which the participants only needed to apply the keywords *hold* and *keep* in their appropriate gaps, then the Mann-Whitney U Test produced  $p=.059$  and  $p=.009$ , respectively. More participants could have generated more conclusive results, as there were only 13 participants in each of the two groups.

On teaching collocations, Rahimi & Momeni (2012) reported that using concordancers and corpus-based activities were more effective at facilitating students' retention of vocabulary than conventional methods (definition, explanation, translation), after 16 weeks of treatment for both the experimental and control groups. The findings support the notion that learners themselves can be at the helm of their own learning experience, where vocabulary is concerned.

Doiz & Elizari (2013) designed a lesson plan for students enrolled in philosophy and citizenship of Spain class at the baccalaureate level. Metaphor- awareness raising activities underpinned the lesson plan for the experimental group, while the control group received the traditional translation approach. It was found that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group ( $p=.001$ ) in short term retention of the taught MWEs during the immediate-test phase. Thus, the study suggests that cognitivist methods of teaching vocabulary are beneficial for learners enrolled in philosophy type courses.

A very noteworthy finding in Khoshniyat & Dowlatabadi (2014) was that the control group translated the elements of the MWEs (idiomatic expressions, which included phrasal verbs), while the experimental group did not when answering the researchers' questions. The authors attributed this insight to the use of Disney films to raise the awareness of conceptual metaphors. This study constitutes one of the few experiments carried out on young learners (12 years old) in the extant literature.

Qorbanian, Safaei Ghalati, & Amini (2016) added to the mounting evidence for using MWEs to aid vocabulary retention by using raising metaphor awareness activities. The authors attributed the better retention of phrasal verbs to the experimental method of instruction for five weeks. Most recently, Beynen (2020) provided an in-depth exploration of metaphors and reading comprehension in STEM education. Using corpus methods, the author found that the first-year engineering courses at the research site featured many instances of metaphorical language in the collocates of reading materials, especially in chemistry and

physics. This constituted the first phase of the study. The second phase investigated whether metaphor comprehension impacted the reading comprehension of those texts. Additionally, the author examined whether the participants' first or second language status affected the comprehension of metaphors in English. It was found that the reading material featured mostly metaphors of personification and familial relationships (e.g. atoms are held together by). Unsurprisingly, native speakers of English were found to have a better comprehension of the reading material.

Insofar as using MWEs for aiding effective vocabulary acquisition and retention is concerned, the extant literature on cognitivist and corpus-based approaches have been growing for the past two decades, and the future of this area of study appears to be vibrant. A summary of this review is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of studies supporting using MWEs for vocabulary teaching

Author(s)	No. of Participants	Methodology	Findings
Deignan, Gabryś, & Solska (1997)	143 Polish university students	Translation of 68 English sentences which contain metaphorical phrases into natural Polish. No control group.	The metaphor awareness-raising method may not be suitable for low-intermediate students, but the authors' own experiences applying the method among intermediate learners were beneficial for vocabulary teaching.
Boers (2000)	118 Flemish secondary students	First experiment: immediate-posttest using a gap -fill task (metaphorical phrases). Control and experimental group present.	Experimental group retained vocabulary better than the control group ( $p < .05$ ).
	73 university students	Second Experiment: immediate-posttest using an essay writing task (metaphorical words and collocations).	The experimental group reproduced more taught metaphorical words and collocations compared to the control group ( $p < .001$ ).
	74 university students	Third experiment: immediate-posttest using a gap fill task (phrasal verbs).	Experimental group performed better than control group when the items were available for reference ( $p < .01$ ), but the experimental group did not perform better than the control group on items taken away from the item reference list.

Beréndi, Csábi, & Kovecses, Z. (2008)	26 secondary school students (aged 13-14)	Immediate-posttest design (one day difference) using a gap fill task (polysemous words of <i>hold</i> and <i>keep</i> , phrasal verbs based on the two words, and idiomatic phrases containing the two words).	Lenient marking revealed a 9.44% decrease in performance for the experimental group in the posttest, and an 18% decrease for the control group.
Rahimi & Momeni (2012)	60 pre-university students (convenient sampling)	Pretest and posttest design. Teaching of collocations using translation and definition methods for Control group. Experimental group were taught collocations by using corpus methods.	Experimental group outperformed control group overall ( $p=.000$ ).
Doiz & Elizari (2013)	40 first-year baccalaureate students	Pretest, immediate-test, and delayed posttest design. One inventory handout, two reading texts, and one gap-fill task.	T-Tests showed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group ( $p=.001$ )
Khoshniyat, & Dowlatbadi (2014)	40 Iranian schoolboys (12 years old)	Pretest and posttest design. Experimental (Disney movies) and control groups (read passages aloud and guessing).	Experimental group outperformed control group ( $p=.000$ ).
Qorbanian, Safaei Qalati, & Amini (2016)	30 Iranian EFL students (English translation studies)	Pretest and Posttest design. Non-random sampling.	Experimental group outperformed control group ( $p=.007$ ). Raising conceptual metaphor awareness helped retention of taught phrasal verbs.
Beynen (2020)	42 new undergraduate students	Mixed-method: Exploratory sequential design. Phase 1 (Concordance analysis of prevalent metaphors in STEM literature), Phase 2 (correlational analysis of native/non-native speaker distinction matched with reading task)	Native English speakers performed better than non-native speakers in interpreting reading material. (medium effect size, $r= -.43$ , $p < .05$ .)

#### 4. Recommendations for using MWEs in ESL vocabulary sessions

The extant literature recommends that phrasal verbs and collocations be organized according to metaphoric themes, e.g. *anger as a hot fluid in a container* (Boers, 2000) when presenting item lists for students to study.

Investing time and effort in cross-linguistic activities such as those in Deignan *et al.* (1997) could generate enjoyable discussions, although the level of difficulty should be taken into utmost consideration. The authors found that longer idiomatic expressions were more difficult for the participants to comprehend. Visual aids would be beneficial as well, to illustrate the metaphors contained in the MWEs [Beréndi *et al.* (2008); Khoshniyat & Dowlatabadi (2014)]. To promote data-driven learning, Rahimi & Momeni (2012) advocate that educators incorporate corpus-based activities in their language classrooms. Refer to Sacristán (2005) for cognitivist vocabulary teaching materials.

#### 5. Conclusion

These two decades have been featuring an interesting melding of two paradigms within applied linguistic research, where vocabulary is concerned; it can be said that Corpus Linguistics has provided the empiricism needed for cognitivists to further develop pedagogy. Being aware that language is made up of idiomatic, prefabricated chunks, informs educators that MWEs should be the main focus when teaching vocabulary.

By explicitly dedicating time to the teaching and learning of MWEs such as phrasal verbs and collocations, L2 learners of English would potentially gain what is lacking in today's educational environment: communicative competence.

Corpus linguistics offers a valuable insight into the patterns of natural language, both in written and spoken form, in that a disproportionately high number of words occur in syntactically and paradigmatically recurring packages, or chunks. Teaching students MWEs, especially phrasal verbs and collocations, offers the added benefit of allowing students to notice how words and expressions are used in context, compared to decontextualized examples used in grammar instruction, which were found to be not as effective (Spada & Lightbown, 1993).

In terms of vocabulary teaching, recent research has provided the necessary evidence for motivating us as ESL educators to act in the best interests of our students, as we emphasize chunking pedagogy.

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