

Overuse or Underuse? A Comparative Study on Phrasal-verb Use between British and American Novice Writers

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Phrasal verbs, like other phraseological patterns, are perceived as notoriously difficult for ESL/EFL learners because they are semantically non-compositional, very often polysemous, and syntactically more flexible than other types of phraseological patterns (e.g. variation of particle positions and pronoun or noun insertions are allowed in phrasal verbs.) It is repeatedly found that regardless of their L1 background, learners tend to avoid using phrasal verbs when there is a single-verb counterpart available (Dagut & Laufer 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson 1993; Liao & Fukuya 2004; Schmitt & Redwood 2011).

Phrasal verbs are, nevertheless, found to be very frequent in both spoken and written registers. Based on the 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC), Gardner and Davies (2007: 347) find that phrasal verbs occur approximately “every 192 words, that is, almost two phrasal verbs per page of written text on average”. And mastery of phrasal verbs, together with other types of phraseological units, is considered an important difference between native-like production and learner language.

Thanks to the development of corpus technology, linguists are now able to investigate learners’ actual performance by building up written or spoken learner corpora (e.g. the *International Corpus of Learner English*, i.e. ICLE, and the *International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage*, i.e. LINDSEI). Corpus-based studies of learner language demonstrate a different picture of learners’ use of phrasal verbs. The avoidance observed in SLA studies is not always found in learners’ actual writing. For instance, in his corpus-based study, Waibel (2007) found that, overall, German learners used more phrasal verbs than native speakers, while Italian students employed fewer phrasal units than L1 English users. This complex picture raises a few questions to which this study endeavours to provide an answer:

1. Can the issue of phrasal-verb use be generalised as a simple matter of ‘avoidance’ in SLA or ‘overuse’ and ‘underuse’ in learner corpora terms?
2. Considering the rapid development of World Englishes, when one searches for (a) native reference corpus(ora), should these different English varieties be separated or taken as a whole?
3. Is there a significant difference between different L1 English varieties in terms of phrasal-verb use?

Four corpora were used in this study. The first two corpora include argumentative essays written by American and British novice writers taken from: the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays* (LOCNESS-USA) and the *General Studies Corpus* (GS-Milton) (Milton, 2001) respectively. The other two corpora consist of academic papers taken from the *Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers* (MICUSP) and the *British Academic Written English* (BAWE) respectively. Phrasal verbs were extracted from the

four corpora using *WordSmith* and the concordances were later saved and manually checked to rule out combinations which were not phrasal verbs (e.g. ...*and they acted out of concern for anyone who may...*; *The obligation to give is best shown in potlatch...*).

The results show that American novice writers tend to use many more phrasal verbs in both genres than their British counterparts. American students also show a greater variety of phrasal verbs in their writing. British students, however, not only use far fewer phrasal verbs in general, but also demonstrate a clear awareness of the genre factor in their use of phrasal verbs, i.e. they tend to use fewer phrasal verbs in the more formal genre: academic papers. The findings indicate that significant differences do exist between the two English varieties in the case of phrasal verbs. It is far more than just a simple issue of overuse or underuse when one compares learners' use of phrasal verbs to either group of native writers. The differences between L1 English varieties should be taken into consideration in learner corpus-based studies on phrasal verbs.

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