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Assessing the challenges with prepositions in phrasal prepositional verbs: Insights from Arab EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Phrasal Prepositional Verbs, MWVs, Arab EFL Learners

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This study investigates the challenges Arab EFL learners encounter when using prepositions in phrasal prepositional verbs (PPVs). Data of the study were collected in two phases. First, 100 common PPVs were identified through eliciting them from 10 EFL teachers. The verbs that were most frequently mentioned were verified for common usage in daily discourse through the BNC. The 20 most frequent PPVs in this list were selected and used as a test administered to 40 English-major students at the Arab Open University, Kuwait to gauge their recognition and production of the correct prepositions. The findings reveal significant difficulties in both recognizing and producing the correct prepositions, influenced by factors such as frequency of PPV usage, lack of transparency in their meanings, lack of equivalent expressions in Arabic, and insufficient focus on such verbs in EFL curricula.

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Introduction

Multi-word verbs of the type known as phrasal verbs are quite common in English daily oral and written discourse. Native speakers of English tend to make ample use of such verbs in their everyday interactions so much so that hardly can a brief conversation proceed with no use

of such verbs. Indeed, they are one of the defining features of English, and as Yablonska (2023, p. 178) notes, English cannot be imagined “without them.” Owing to the significant presence of such verbs in both conversational and written discourse, it is essential that EFL learners comprehend and use them in their oral and written communication. These verbs are classified into three types based on their constituents: two- or three- word verbs and based on the type of particle attached to the verb, i.e., a preposition or an adverbial particle. The two-word verbs can be either phrasal verbs or prepositional verbs, where the former are composed of two elements, the first is the actual verb and the second is an adverbial particle. *Get up, look up, and turn off* are examples of this type. The second type, prepositional verbs, are composed of two elements, the first is a verb and the second is a preposition. Examples of this type include *look at, take after, etc.* One of the major differences between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs is the movability of the particle in the case of the phrasal verbs. Thus, while it is possible to say *look up this word* or *look the word up*, it is not possible to say **look him at*, since the preposition is not separable from its verb. Phrasal prepositional verbs (PPVs), the third type, is composed of three elements, the first is a verb, the second is an adverbial particle and the third is a preposition. *Look down on, put up with, look up to* are among the common PPVs. Verbs of this third type are not as frequent in daily communication as is the case with the other two, yet rarely would a conversation that extends for some time exhibit no use of such verbs.

Many grammar books explain the different features that distinguish these three types from one another including Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2004), Carter and McCarthy (2006), *Collins Cobuild York English Usage* (1992), Crystal (2008), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Quirk et al. (1985), Thakur (1987), among others. Some tend to use the label ‘phrasal verbs’ to refer to the three types. For instance, Crystal (2008) defines a ‘phrasal verb’ as “a type of verb consisting of a sequence of a lexical element plus one or more particles e.g. come in, get up, look out for” (p. 367). Despite his use of the term ‘phrasal verbs,’ his definition and the examples he provides show that he uses it to refer to the three types. Thus, for scholars such as Crystal, the label phrasal verbs is used as an umbrella term to refer to the three types of MWVs. Others, such as Thakur (1987) and Carter and McCarthy (2006) refer to three types of the MWVs as phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, and phrasal prepositional verbs. Such scholars and many grammar reference books provide more or less a similar definition of multi-word verbs. Carter and McCarthy (2006), for instance, provide the following definition for a multi-word verb:

A lexical verb, which may be combined with one or two particles to function as a verb with a unitary meaning. There are three kinds of multi-word verb. Phrasal verbs have adverb particles ... Prepositional verbs take a preposition..., and phrasal-prepositional verbs take both an adverb and a preposition (p. 911).

The nature of the prepositions of MWVs has also been the focus of many studies including that of Tjabaka (2023) who explored the grammatical functions of certain prepositions that appear in phrasal prepositional verbs and in other grammatical forms, as is the case with /to/ which appears in the infinitive.

Objectives of the Study

This paper attempts to explore the extent to which upper-intermediate Arab EFL learners have mastered the use of prepositions that are parts of common phrasal prepositional verbs at the levels of recognition and production. More specifically, the paper seeks answers to the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent can Arab EFL learners recognize the appropriate preposition in common phrasal prepositional verbs?

RQ2: To what extent can Arab EFL learners produce the appropriate preposition in common phrasal prepositional verbs, placed in appropriate context?

RQ3: What difficulties do students encounter when dealing with such prepositions?

RQ4: What implications does the study have for the teaching of English?

Rationale

The immense presence of the multi-word verbs in daily exchanges necessitates learning them and using them in real life contexts. McCarthy (2017) maintains that the *Cambridge Phrasal Verbs dictionary* “covers around 6,000 phrasal verbs and their meanings, which gives us some idea of how common they are and how big a challenge they present to learners of English” (para. 4). Such a huge number of these verbs dictates that EFL learners should learn them if they are to reach a reasonable degree of competence in English. Indeed, if a learner desires to achieve a native-like competence, he or she needs to grow an acute sense of the use of such idiomatic expressions, which is quite a challenging task. Although many studies have been conducted to investigate EFL learners’ acquisition of phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, as discussed in the review of literature section below, no study to the best knowledge of the author, has explored EFL learners’ mastery of the *prepositions* of phrasal prepositional verbs at the levels of recognition and production, at least in the context of Arab EFL learners. Thus, this study fills in this important gap.

Literature Review

Many studies have shown that multi-word verbs pose significant challenges for EFL learners including those conducted by Albaqami (2021), Aldahesh (2008), Fareh and Saeed (2009), Gandorah (2015), Hameed and Jassim (2015), among others. Aldahesh (2008) highlighted the difficulties that “Arabic professional translators and Arabic translation students encounter when translating IEPVs [idiomatic English phrasal verbs] into Arabic” (p. 2), principally due to the failure to “achieve functional-pragmatic equivalents of such verbs” (p. xxi). This issue is echoed in Gardner and Davies (2007), who argue that “phrasal verbs are notoriously difficult for nonnative learners to acquire, a problem exacerbated by the fact that they tend to be very common and highly productive in the English language as a whole” (p. 340). They also cite many studies that report a negative attitude of EFL learners toward these multi-word verbs. McArthur (1975), as cited in Aldahesh (2008: p. 6), pertinently describes multi-word verbs as “a foreign learner's biggest headache”. This is comprehensible since the meaning of such verbs may not necessarily be arrived at through the meaning of the parts of which they are comprised. The issue becomes thornier when the mother tongue of the EFL learners does not have the concept of phrasal verbs. Al-Otaibi (2018) investigated the use and avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners. He found that students would tend to shy away from using

phrasal verbs, showing a clear preference for their one-word equivalents. Margan (2024) investigated the challenges associated with English phrasal verbs from the perspective of Romanian speakers and found that, when presented with both a non-phrasal verb and a phrasal one, they tend “to avoid the latter...” (p. 74). Albaqami (2021) reported that EFL learners frequently face difficulties in comprehending and using English phrasal verbs due to their idiomatic nature and complexity. Alshayban (2022) investigated Arab EFL learners’ recognition and use of phrasal verbs in both oral and written discourse. The study found that “students are likely more familiar with phrasal verbs in writing than in an oral context” (p. 55). This underscores the challenge faced by Arab EFL learners: i.e., they tend to struggle with recognizing them in oral discourse.

The impact of EFL learners’ native language on the acquisition of phrasal verbs has been well-documented. Gandorah (2015) summarizes results of studies that show that English learners whose mother tongues have phrasal verbs “made a difference in favor of the learner” (p. 7). Similarly, in a study titled “Phrasal verbs in learner English: A Corpus-based Study of German and Italian Students,” Waibel (2007) compares the use of phrasal verbs in the essays of advanced German and advanced Italian learners of English. She found that German students’ essays tend to manifest more use of phrasal verbs than the essays of Italian students. Her findings confirm previous studies that “structural differences between the native and the target language impedes the successful learning of phrasal verbs...” She maintains that “the similarity of German particles with English phrasal verbs resulted in a confident use of phrasal verbs, whereas dissimilarities between Italian and English resulted in a salient underuse” (p. 162). Nonetheless, it does not mean that if the mother tongue of a learner possesses a phrasal verb system, grasping and using their prepositions correctly will always be an easy task. Gandorah maintains, “Although the Dutch language possesses the category of PVs, students showed ‘a tendency to play it safe’ with EPVs ... or with ‘extreme caution’ according to Schachter (1974)” (p. 7).

Opacity of the meaning of these verbs is another aspect that exacerbates the difficulty encountered by EFL learners. The idiomatic meaning that such verbs may convey requires additional efforts on the part of the learner. In a study about the acquisition of English phrasal verbs by Catalan learners of English, Rovira Diaz (2017) found that “when the degree of transparency of the phrasal verb was low, learners showed an increased level of avoidance” (p. 2). Similar to Catalan EFL learners, Arab learners of English manifest a similar attitude; Gandorah’s study, for instance, “demonstrated that the idiomatic PVs are avoided much more than the literal PVs ...” (p. 71).

Although Arabic possesses prepositional verbs, as argued in Aldahesh (2008) and Mubarak (2015), it is worth mentioning that Arabic does not have verbs that are composed of three elements: a verb, an adverbial particle and a preposition, i.e., phrasal prepositional verbs, as is the case in English. A verb such as *look down on* is realized as one word in Arabic, namely *yaḥtaqir*. In some cases, a preposition is added, as in *catch up with* ‘*yalḥaqu bi*,’ two words not three. This lack of a ‘phrasal prepositional verbs’ system in Arabic like the one in English contributes to making this sub-category quite challenging for Arab learners of English.

The multiplicity of meaning a multi-word verb can have constitutes a further aspect of the difficulty. Specifically, the fact that some of the MWVs manifest different shades of meaning in different contexts aggravates the challenge for EFL learners. McCarthy (2017) contends:

...another problem for learners is that phrasal and prepositional verbs often have more than one meaning. So, [T]he plane took off (left the ground) is different from [H]e took off his coat (removed), which is different again from [T]hey took £10 off the price (deducted). What's more, it is often not easy to guess the meaning unless we have a lot of context (para. 4).

The multiplicity of meanings of MWVs was a major reason behind learners' avoiding them in Gandorah's study. In this respect, he states:

Participants ... preferred to use a single word in places where PVs would sound more natural and native-like. The reason behind this behavior resides in the polysemous nature of EPVs not in their syntactic property. The semantic complexity makes the learning burden heavier for ELLs to acquire EPVs and use them easily." (p.71)

Other studies have shown that the difficulties of the MWVs can lead EFL learners to use their own prepositions and or particles. In a study titled "Particle Choices and Collocation in Cameroon English Phrasal Verbs," Epoge (2016) found that Cameroon learners of English exhibited a tendency to substitute standard "preposition particle for another preposition particle... as [in]...I *came over* a strange man in my village today. (for SBE 'Come across', i.e., to meet by chance) You have only had a slight cold. You will *get off* it in a day or two. (for SBE 'get over', i.e., to recover from)." Epoge maintains that "speakers of English in Cameroon come up with these changes in order to make the phrasal verbs comprehensible among themselves" (p. 110).

The difficulty of the prepositions of MWVs have also been mentioned in Fareh and Saeed (2009). They investigated the difficulties that Arab EFL learners encounter in using prepositions at the levels of both recognition and production. Among the major causes of the difficulty the study revealed are "the semantic complexity of prepositions, the multi-uses each preposition has and negative transfer from Arabic" (p. 93). An intriguing result in this study pertains to the difficulty posed by prepositions that are parts of multi-word verbs. The authors found that "prepositions that are part of idioms and multiword verbs tend to be the most difficult for learners." For instance, less than 50% of the students' responses to items that contained prepositions that are part of multiword verbs were accurate. The study concluded that

"...one of the major difficulties that the subjects encountered when attempting to recognize the appropriate choice of prepositions was these two categories, i.e., prepositions as parts of verbs and prepositions as parts of idiomatic expressions" (p. 100).

Such findings have motivated the author to conduct this separate study to investigate the extent to which prepositions that are part of multi-word verbs constitute a difficulty for the EFL learner and the causes of such a problem. Hameed and Jassim (2015) conducted a study that investigated this very point, but only in two types: phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs. They explored “Iraqi EFL learners’ ability to recognize and produce phrasal and prepositional verbs” (p. 13). Their results showed that “EFL learners demonstrated poor performance in using the suitable preposition or particle when they are asked to recognize or produce multi-word verbs” (p. 13). However, as the authors state, they did not include phrasal prepositional verbs in their study. In this respect, they clearly state “multi-word verbs can be classified into three groups: phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs. The present study discusses only the first two groups” (p. 13). Thus, our current study fills in an important gap, i.e., investigating EFL learner’s mastery of prepositions that are part of phrasal prepositional verbs.

After this brief review of relevant literature related to our study, the paper will proceed as follows. Section 3 presents a description of the methodology followed in data collecting, and the participants from whom the data were culled. The findings of the study are presented in section 4, followed by the discussion part, section 5, which highlights students’ responses and motivation of such responses. Section six presents the conclusions and recommendations.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data in the study were culled in two stages:

Stage 1: Eliciting Commonly Used PPVs

For this task, ten (10) EFL instructors, teaching in the foundation program at the Arab Open University (OU), Kuwait, were randomly selected from a list of 61 permanent and adjunct teachers teaching in the program. They were requested to jot down in a maximum of ten minutes ten most commonly used PPVs each. They were asked to suggest phrasal prepositional verbs that tend to be among the ones most commonly used in their daily discourse, in different settings, in and outside their classes. This process yielded 100 verbs, which were then ranked by frequency of occurrence. Seven verbs appeared 41 times with a frequency range of 5-8: *put up with*, *look up to*, *catch up with*, *look forward to*, *come up with*, *get down to*, and *look down on*.

Three (3) verbs appeared 4 times each, five (5) appeared three times each, seven (7) appeared twice each, and eighteen (18) one time each. Consequently, based on the judgment of the teachers, a list of twenty (20) out of the 100 proposed emerged to be the most frequent.

The following table summarizes the frequency of each verb in the data list proposed by the teachers.

Table 1*Frequency of Occurrence of the Verbs in the Study*

No.	Verb	Frequency in the 100 Collected Data List
1.	put up with	8
2.	look up to	7
3.	catch up with	6
4.	look forward to	5
5.	come up with	5
6.	get down to	5
7.	look down on	5
8.	keep up with	4
9.	get along with	4
10.	make up for	3
11.	get away with	3
12.	check up on	3
13.	look out for	3
14.	run out of	3
15.	hold on to	2
16.	live up to	2
17.	stand up for	2
18.	come on in	2
19.	pass on to	2
20.	cut down on	2

As Table 1 shows, the verbs classify themselves into three categories: the first containing the verbs that were suggested by most instructors and received four (4) or more hits, the second comprising the verbs that occurred three times (3) each in the elicited data list and the third encompassing the verbs that were suggested by two instructors each. In the discussion, we will refer to the categories as, the first category, the second, and the third, with the first comprising the most common verbs, the second, the second most common verbs, and the third containing the third most common verbs.

The frequency of these verbs was then verified using the British National Corpus (BNC), confirming their common and frequent use. The corpus revealed that they are frequent with some of them showing a remarkable frequency, as Table (2) shows.

Table 2*Frequency of Occurrence of the Verbs in the Study in BNC*

No.	Verb	Frequency of the 20 selected verbs in the BNC
1.	put up with	609
2.	look up to	66
3.	catch up with	261
4.	look forward to	1000
5.	come up with	1205
6.	get down to	208
7.	look down on	89
8.	keep up with	352
9.	get along with	31
10.	make up for	297
11.	get away with	653
12.	check up on	65
13.	look out for	549
14.	run out of	463
15.	hold on to	358
16.	live up to	256
17.	stand up for	112
18.	come on in	109
19.	pass on to	109
20.	cut down on	187

Table 2 shows that the results of checking the proposed list in the BNC confirm that these twenty PPVs are common and frequent in daily use, with 80% of them occurring more than 100 times in the corpus. Among the most frequently used PPVs based on the BNC are *come up with*, *look forward to* and *put up with* with 1205 hits for the first, 1000 for the second and 609 for the third. These three verbs are part of the first group, i.e., the group that comprises verbs suggested by the teacher informants to be the most frequent. Four out of the five verbs in the second most frequent group based on the teacher informants' judgment show frequency of use ranging from 297 to 653, again which supports their judgement. Group three show frequency of use in the BNC ranging from 109 to 358. Four verbs out of the twenty were shown by the BNC to be the least frequent compared to the other 16 verbs in the group with less than 100 hits for each, three of them were in group 1 and one in group 2. Although these four are not as frequent as the other 16 verbs, they remain relatively frequent.

Testing Instrument

The BNC results supported the frequency judgments made by the teacher informants, validating the use of these twenty verbs for the study; they were considered a felicitous group of data to be utilized to investigate the mastery of EFL learners' use of the prepositions that are part of these frequent PPVs. The twenty verbs were made into a testing instrument (a questionnaire) comprising two versions, each consisting of twenty (20) statements that contextualize the use of each PPV in the study. The first version is the production one, which

gauges students' ability to use the appropriate preposition that is part of each verb. The second version is the recognition one, which tests students' ability to recognize the correct preposition from provided alternatives.

Example from Recognition Version

In the recognition part, learner subjects were asked to read each statement in the testing instrument and choose the best alternative a, b, c, or d which appropriately completes the meaning of each statement, as in:

Our company has a number of excellent employees – we need to improve their package of benefits in order to hold on ----- them.

- | | |
|--------|---------|
| a. to | b. with |
| c. for | d. upon |

Example from Production Version

In the production version, the EFL learner subjects were provided with a list of choices at the top of the testing instrument and were asked to fill in the gaps of the contextualizing statements with appropriate prepositions from the list, as in:

We have to stand up _____ our rights; we should not stay silent when it comes to our rights.

The students were to select the appropriate preposition from the following list:

to	in	by	for	on	with	about
of	off	over	from	over	upon	

After designing the two questionnaires (testing instruments), two colleagues (expert English teachers) reviewed the questionnaires for validity and reliability, and their suggestions were incorporated into the final versions.

Participants

The subjects of the study are English-major students from the AOU, Kuwait. They come from different Arab countries. The questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 40 senior English major students during the academic year 2022. The English level of the students is upper-intermediate since they had met the language requirement prior to their admission into the English Language and Literature program, which is scoring at least 65-70 on the TOEFL (iBT), 6 in the IELTS or 80 on the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT). They had also studied writing, grammar as well as a number of linguistics and literature courses including Introduction to Language, Introduction to Literature, the Arts of English, and Translation during the years they had completed in the program.

The production version of testing instrument was administered first, followed by the recognition version a week later to prevent any washback effect. Students were given one hour to complete each version of the questionnaire.

Results

The following Table summarizes students' responses to the items in the recognition version of the questionnaire:

Table 3

Students' Recognition of the Prepositions of the PPVs in the Study

No	verb	Frequency in the 100 data list	Correct responses out of 40	% Of correct responses	Average of correct responses within each category
1.	put up with	8	19	47.5%	48.05%
2.	look up to	7	15	37.5%	
3.	catch up with	6	8	20%	
4.	look forward to	5	22	55%	
5.	come up with	5	21	52.5%	
6.	get down to	5	17	42.5%	
7.	look down on	5	23	57.5%	
8.	keep up with	4	20	50%	
9.	get along with	4	28	70%	
10.	make up for	3	20	50%	47.5%
11.	get away with	3	22	55%	
12.	check up on	3	14	35%	
13.	look out for	3	14	35%	
14.	run out of	3	25	62.5%	
15.	hold on to	2	9	22.5%	37%
16.	live up to	2	16	40%	
17.	stand up for	2	21	52.5%	
18.	come on in	2	17	42.5%	
19.	pass on to	2	18	45%	
20.	cut down on	2	8	20%	
Total	20	76	357	44.62%	

As Table 3 shows, the students' performance in the recognition version of the testing instrument is intriguing. Although the students targeted in the study are upper-intermediate, as explained in the methodology section, their recognition of the right prepositions is rather low. Only 357 out of 800 responses were correct, i.e., 44.62%, which means that 55.38% of the students' responses were inaccurate. Besides this, only 9 of the twenty PPVs in the study received 50% or a little higher of accurate preposition responses which means that more than 55% of the items got less than 50% of accurate responses. What is more, none of the verbs received 100% correct preposition responses; the highest correct responses were 28 out of 40 (70%), received by *get along with*. This verb is one of the verbs in the first category of most frequent PPVs based on the data list, proposed by four of the ten teacher informants, as Table (1) shows, but was one of the four PPVs receiving the lowest frequency based on BNC results.

In terms of correct responses in the three categories, it is clear that the most common verbs emerged as the ones that received the highest percentage of accurate preposition responses, followed by the second group and then the third with 48.05% of correct responses as the average in the first, 47.5 in the second and 37% in the third.

As regards the students' performance in the production version of the testing instrument, Table (4) summarizes the results, showing the number of correct preposition responses in each verb as well as percentages of correct use.

Table 4*Students' Production of the Prepositions of the PPVs in the Study*

No.	verb	Frequency in the 100 data list	Correct responses out of 40	% Of correct responses	Average of correct responses within each category
1.	put up with	8	18	45%	
2.	look up to	7	12	30%	
3.	catch up with	6	14	35%	
4.	look forward to	5	14	35%	
5.	come up with	5	32	80%	
6.	get down to	5	16	40%	36.1
7.	look down on	5	0	0%	
8.	keep up with	4	10	25%	
9.	get along with	4	14	35%	
10.	make up for	3	13	32.5%	
11.	get away with	3	9	22.5%	
12.	check up on	3	9	22.5%	32%
13.	look out for	3	18	45%	
14.	run out of	3	15	37.5%	
15.	hold on to	2	0	0%	
16.	live up to	2	0	0%	
17.	stand up for	2	24	60%	
18.	come on in	2	32	80%	25.8
19.	pass on to	2	6	15%	
20.	cut down on	2	0	0%	
Total	20	76	256	32%	

The results in the production version of the testing instrument are more intriguing. As Table 4 shows, more than two thirds of the verbs in the study received inaccurate answers, with only 256 responses out of 800 (32%) being accurate, which means that 68% of students' answers were incorrect. This low percentage of right answers is quite surprising. Equally surprising is that one fifth of the verbs in the study received zero (0) correct preposition responses, i.e., none of the forty students in the study came up with a correct preposition response to any one of these four verbs. On the other hand, only three items out of the 20 received more than 50% of correct responses compared to nine (9) items in the recognition version, with the remaining majority (13 items) receiving between 6 and 18 accurate responses out of 40 each, i.e., less than 50%. As is the case in the recognition part, none of the verbs received 100% correct answers in the production part.

In comparing the percentages of correct answers received in each of the three categories, Table 4 shows that the average of correct preposition responses in the first category is 36.1%, followed by the second category with an average of 32%, and the third with an average of 25.8%. The findings show clearly that 75% of the items that received a zero (0) of correct preposition originate in the third category of verbs. Similarly, in the recognition part, five verbs out of the six in this category received low correct answers.

Discussion

The findings presented above show that the students' ability to recognize and produce the right prepositions of highly common PPVs is unexpectedly low. The average of correct responses was not even 50% in either version of the testing instruments. These low percentages of correct responses highlight the difficulty of the multiword verbs for nonnative English learners, aligning with McArthur's (1975) assertion that multi-word verbs are "a foreign learner's biggest headache" (Aldahesh 2008: p. 6). These intriguing results also confirm the findings of Gardner and Davies (2007: p. 340) who contend that "phrasal verbs are notoriously difficult for nonnative learners to acquire," and support Fareh and Saeed's (2009) findings that prepositions within multi-word verbs are particularly challenging for EFL learners (p. 100). While it is true that such low results can be ascribed to the rather difficult nature of prepositions, the prepositions in the study are parts of highly common PPVs. In what follows, we will discuss possible causes that are behind students' low performance in light of what the findings reveal. One of the factors that contributed to correct use of preposition or lack thereof is the degree of frequency of the PPV; the more frequent a PPV is, the more competent EFL learners appeared to be in recognizing and using the preposition of that verb, with a few exceptions, such as the verb "to catch up with," which will be discussed later. This correlation is evident in both parts of the testing instrument, where the first category which encompasses the most frequent verbs in the study emerged as the one receiving the highest average of correct use of prepositions, followed by the second and third most frequent categories, as revealed in Tables (3) and (4). However, while frequency emerged as an effective factor, it does not hold for every verb in the data. Verbs that are most common in daily use, based on the elicited data, did not always receive high percentages of correct preposition responses. Verbs such as "put up with," "catch up with," and "get down to" are among the most frequently used PPVs based on our data (first category verbs). Yet, none of these verbs received even 50% of correct preposition responses in either the recognition or production version of the testing instrument. The preposition of *put up with*, a verb that received the highest hits in the elicited data, and the third highest frequency rank based on the BNC, got just 19 and 18 accurate responses out of 40 in the recognition and production parts respectively, i.e., 47.5% and 45%. Furthermore, the verb *look down on* which is one of the verbs in the first category of the elicited data had zero (0) correct preposition responses in the production part, as shown in Table (3). On the other hand, *stand up for* which showed 2 hits only in the elicited data and ranks 14th among the 20 verbs based on the BNC, obtained 60% correct preposition responses in the production version of the testing instrument and 52.5% in the recognition one. Again, these results indicate that despite the importance of frequency as a factor, there are other contributing factors. In scrutinizing the findings further, it is observed that when frequency of use is combined with immediacy of context, the effectiveness of this notion as a determinant of correct use is strengthened. For instance, the verb *come on in*, a verb in the third group and which ranks 15th of the verbs in the study based on the BNC, is used frequently in classroom contexts; students seek the permission of their teachers to enter the class particularly when being late, as in the following example, which is one of the items in the testing instrument:

1. A: I am sorry I am late. I got held up in the traffic.
B: It is OK. Please *come on in* and sit over there.

The frequency of the verb in the immediate physical context of student learning premises makes the PPV familiar to learners. Consequently, the preposition of this verb received the highest percentage of correct use in the production version of the testing instrument. Another verb frequently used in teaching settings is *come up with*; its preposition received a remarkably high percentage of correct use with 80% of the students opting for the right response. The only viable reason is that this verb is part of classroom language as in ‘who can come up with an explanation?’; ‘you have come up with a good answer’, ‘try to come up with a suitable answer to this question,’ etc. Thus, when the notion of frequency is associated with the notion of immediacy of context (familiar immediate contexts), its impact becomes stronger.

The findings reveal other determinant causes that contribute to the difficulty encountered by the learners including lack of transparency in the meaning of the components that constitute the PPVs and lack of similar expressions in Arabic. Lack of transparency or abstractness of the components of some of the verbs in the study added to the difficulty encountered by the students. Some of the PPVs are so opaque that the meanings of the individual parts that constitute these verbs do not reveal the total meaning of such verbs. For instance, in the sentence:

2. He is always rude! I do not know how you *put up with* his behavior.

The components that constitute *put up with* hardly denote any sense that hints to the meaning of this multi-word verb. Nothing can be inferred or deduced from the three elements comprising this verb which indicates a sense of ‘tolerance,’ ‘patience’ or ‘endurance.’ The meaning of the verb is idiomatic, which means students should learn the verb in its entirety, i.e., lexical verb, adverbial particle, and preposition. Although most of the PPVs in the study tend to manifest various degrees of abstractness, some tend to be at the extreme level of opacity. The verbs *catch up with*, *hold on to*, *cut down on* and *live up to* show a high level of abstractness, which made them among the most difficult for the students in the study. These four verbs received 0% of correct preposition use in the production version of the testing instrument. This finding supports previous studies that have shown that EFL/ESL learners tend to avoid non-transparent phrasal verbs such as those conducted by Gandorah (2015) and Rovira Diaz (2017), among others (see discussion above). Gandorah’s study, for instance, showed that the semantic complexity “makes the learning burden heavier for ELLs to acquire EPVs and use them easily.” (p.71).

In contrast, the components that make up *stand up for* tend to reveal its meaning slightly. The preposition of this verb received the third highest percentage of correct responses in the production version of the testing instrument and received more than 50% of correct preposition use in the recognition one despite being one of the verbs in the third category and ranks 14th based on BNC. The following is the exemplifying sentence used to contextualize *stand up for* in the testing instrument:

3. We have to *stand up* _____ our rights; we should not stay silent when it comes to our rights.

Here, the assumed familiarity with the verb is ascribed to the high frequency of the phrasal verb *stand up*, which is used highly in daily and particularly classroom discourse. The meaning of the preposition *for*, that makes this phrasal verb a PPV seems to be predicted accurately by many of the students in the study, i.e., you stand up for a purpose. In addition, the fairly revealing context seems to contribute to the students' recognition of the right answer. The sentence "we should not stay silent when it comes to our rights" provides an important hint to the user, i.e., not staying silent when it comes to one's rights implies defending them.

Lack of equivalent idiomatic expressions in Arabic contributed to the difficulty encountered by the learners. Verbs such as *live up to* in (4) below were among the verbs that posed significant difficulty for the learners. Consider:

4. The breathtakingly beautiful scenery certainly *lived up* _____ expectations. It was as good as we expected.

In addition to being one of the opaqueness in terms of transparency of meaning, lack of similar or equivalent expressions to this verb in Arabic exacerbated the difficulty encountered by the learners. As shown in (Table 4) above, none of the students in the study selected the right preposition of this multi-word verb in the production version of the testing instrument. The expression 'lived up to expectations,' meaning 'it was exactly what we expected' is not voiced this way in Arabic; Arabic does not have an equivalent idiomatic expression that conveys this sense. Similar is the case with *look up to*, which is one of the PPVs whose prepositions received low percentages of correct use as Tables (3) and (4) above demonstrate. The following is the contextualizing example used in the testing instrument:

5. He *looks up* _____ his eldest brother. He sometimes attempts to behave like him.

Although Arabic uses the verb *yu'addimu* in expressions such as *yu'addimu mudiirahu* 'he respects his manager highly,' this Arabic wording does not convey the English sense which includes the speaker's desire to attempt to be like the person highly admired. The second sentence in the contextualizing statement conveys this very sense, i.e., attempting 'to behave like him,' yet this context was not of much help to the informants. This finding agrees with previous studies that have proved that EFL/ESL learners whose mother tongues possess MWV systems make confident use of them. Waibel's study (2007) which compares the use of phrasal verbs in the essays of advanced German and advanced Italian learners is a case in point. Waibel found that "dissimilarities between Italian and English resulted in a salient underuse" (p. 162). As indicated above, while Arabic possesses phrasal and prepositional verbs, it does not have phrasal prepositional verbs, as is the case in English.

Unlike *look up to*, the verb *stand up for* tends to have a fairly known Arabic counterpart, namely *yaqifu ma'a*, literally 'stand up with.' The availability of a similar expression in Arabic accounts, even partially, for the high percentage of correct responses the preposition of this verb received, i.e., language learners benefited from this interlanguage similarity, although a few suggested *with* as a response, which can be described as a negative transfer. Choosing *with* rather than *for* to complete the statement in (3) above might be similar to the finding reported

by Epoge (2016). Epoge found that Cameroon learners of English exhibited a tendency to substitute a standard “preposition particle for another preposition particle” (p. 110).

Improper treatment of PPVs in EFL teaching seems to contribute to the difficulty encountered by the learners in recognizing and using the proper prepositions of common PPVs. In addition to the factors of low frequency, opacity, and unavailability of equivalent Arabic idiomatic expressions in Arabic, improper treatment of PPVs in both EFL curricula and teaching settings seems to contribute to the difficulty encountered by the EFL learners in the study. A case in point is the low correct preposition responses in the case of the verb *look forward to*. This PPV is frequent, relatively transparent, used in the immediate context of students, and has an equivalent counterpart in Arabic, i.e. *yataṭala‘u ‘ila*, yet only 22 out of 40 students selected the right preposition in the recognition version of the testing instrument compared to 14 only in the production version. This verb should be familiar to most students at the upper-intermediate English level as it is frequently used in formal letter and email writing, as in ‘I am looking forward to hearing from you,’ ‘we are looking forward to seeing you soon,’ etc. The observed lack of familiarity with this highly important and frequently used verb raises questions and concerns about the content of the syllabus of the English EFL programs as well as the style of teaching followed by EFL instructors. It is true that prepositions tend to be among the most difficult language items for EFL learners, yet the prepositions tested in this study are parts of important lexical verbs that are commonly used in daily discourse.

Conclusion

This study has investigated Arab EFL learners’ mastery of prepositions within common PPVs. The findings revealed that students encountered significant difficulty in recognizing and producing the right PPVs’ prepositions. The average percentage of correct answers in both versions of the testing instrument was not even 50%, a low percentage of correct use that should ring bells as regards the way prepositions of important MWVs are presented in EFL textbooks and taught in Arab EFL settings. The findings demonstrated a positive correlation between frequency of use in daily discourse and students’ mastery of the prepositions of PPVs at the levels of recognition and production. Generally, more recurrent PPVs were associated with higher competence in recognizing and producing the correct prepositions. However, this correlation did not always work across the board. In certain cases, even highly frequent PPVs posed difficulties for students. A deeper analysis revealed that the context of usage also plays a crucial role. For instance, if the notion of frequency is accompanied by the factor of physical immediacy of context, then the effectiveness of this notion is strengthened. In addition to the notion of frequency that emerged as a determinant factor accounting for correct use of PPVs’ prepositions or lack thereof, other factors played a noticeable role, too. Among these are transparency of the PPV’s meaning, the availability of equivalent idiomatic expressions in Arabic, and the way these verbs are addressed in EFL teaching materials.

The low percentages of correct use of the prepositions in the study imply that the prepositions of these verbs are not adequately addressed in both classroom teaching and the EFL syllabus. In this regard, we suggest that EFL teachers should ensure that they present such verbs in their teaching as they are essential for competent language use. Avoiding such verbs to facilitate

classroom communication is not an excuse. These verbs are integral to natural communication and learners should be exposed to them gradually from the early stages of learning English. To motivate learners to use such verbs, teachers should raise to the level of consciousness the importance of using them in writing and daily oral discourse, as they are essential for attaining competence in English. Students need to understand that mastering idiomatic expressions, including PPVs, is key to reaching a native-like level of proficiency. They also need to understand that using non-standard prepositions in such PPVs, as in ‘stand up *with*’ for ‘stand up *for*,’ or ‘look forward *on*’ for ‘look forward *to*,’ or any other incorrect preposition will make them sound non-native. In addition, students should be warned that incorrect use of prepositions in these highly common PPVs can be stigmatized or, worse, can result in miscommunication.

EFL instructors can expose learners to ample contextualized examples extracted from different genres such as TV reports, commentaries, and debates. In addition to learning through these activities, students will realize the frequent use of PPVs in such genres and the importance of using them correctly. Teachers can use important e-sites that present language data such as BNC, for instance, and get contextualized texts that use PPVs in different genres.

Textbook writers should ensure that essential language elements, such as PPVs, are systematically introduced at various EFL levels. They should focus on the most common ones and present different senses of these verbs at each level of EFL learning. Our elicited data of most frequently used 100 PPVs, as judged by EFL teachers, could serve as a valuable reference for inclusion in textbooks. Reading passages featuring PPVs should be incorporated into various units, with grammatical notes highlighting the prepositions used with each PPV to guide learners. Additionally, each unit that includes PPVs could direct learners to online resources that provide further examples and practice exercises for these verbs and their prepositions. At elementary levels, textbooks could, for instance, use color-coding to help learners differentiate the components of the PPVs, where the main verb, the adverbial particle, and the preposition are each assigned a distinct color. Furthermore, textbook series progressing from elementary to advanced levels should feature a well-defined plan demonstrating how the presentation of MWVs, including PPVs, evolves across levels. This plan should clearly outline how prepositions are reviewed, developed, and tested at each stage.

While we encourage EFL texts to carry out the suggestions we provide here, we, motivated by the findings of this study, call for another study that investigates the manner in which important language items, particularly those that are used idiomatically, are presented in EFL textbooks.

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