



Original Article

# English Majors' Difficulties in Using Phrasal Verbs in Academic Writing

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**Abstract:** Phrasal verbs (PVs) are notably essential for English language learners due to their common use in spoken and informal written language; however, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners may find it difficult to master phrasal verbs, not only at receptive but also productive levels. The syntactic and semantic complexities prove much more troublesome in academic writing for those learners whose mother tongue does not feature phrasal verb formations. Therefore, this study aims at exploring English majors' difficulties with phrasal verbs in terms of syntactic, semantic properties, and formality and informality of phrasal verbs in academic writing at a tertiary institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The participants of the study consisted of 124 English majors. The quantitative and qualitative research methods were applied to collect data via questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The SPSS software (20.0) was used to process the quantitative data collected from questionnaires, while the content analysis was applied to analyze the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that research participants faced difficulties in academic writing most from the semantic property, followed by the formality and informality of phrasal verbs and the syntactic property. Such preliminary findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding of English as a foreign language learners' difficulties with phrasal verbs as well as to enhance the quality of academic teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* Difficulty, English, phrasal verb, semantic property, syntactic property.

## 1. Introduction

English phrasal verbs (PVs) are widely used in both spoken and written forms. English

language users tend to practice and implement phrasal verbs rather than single verbs because they think that with the variety of phrasal verbs, they avoid the strange, formal, and self-conscious feelings from the reader and the listener. This can lead the speech or the conversation to be unnatural. It is a

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misconception that phrasal verbs should not be used in essays, a type of formal context [1].

Boers [2] presents two categories of learners' problems with phrasal verbs, including semantic or vocabulary problems and syntactic or word order problems. In consideration of semantic problems, De Cock [3] emphasizes that English learners usually do not consider the phrasal verb of the two or three-word verb as a lexical unit with a special meaning. In addition, learners also ignore the importance of the particle of phrasal verbs, especially when a single word in their first language can convey the meaning. Consequently, it is not surprising for them to skip the particle or the final component and produce sentences such as "turn the light" and "pick the key" instead of "turn on the light" and "pick up the key". Siyanova and Schmitt [4] state that many phrasal verbs do not have transparent meanings. As a result, it is not easy and impossible to interpret the meaning of the verb by combining the meaning of each part. In terms of syntactic problems, Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman [5] indicate that students can be confused because of the placement of objects in relation to the particle. It means that they are confused about certain phrasal verbs being separable or non-separable. English learners get challenged in learning phrasal verbs due to the teacher's teaching method. The teaching method cannot be suitable to students' requirements, or the teaching method is not difficult to understand. Gyimah et al., [6] argue that sometimes teachers and textbooks overburden students in mastering phrasal verbs and mislead them. Within the research context, although English majors had to take academic writing courses and language skills courses in their first and second years at university, they still faced similarly above-mentioned challenges in using phrasal verb (e.g., omission, addition, misformation, and misordering) in academic writing. As such, English majors' academic writing was usually affected by their wrong use of phrasal verbs. Therefore, there should be an official study on difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing. To that void, this study aims at delving into English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing in

the context of a tertiary institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research question is set as follows:

What are the difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing encountered by tertiary English majors?

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have defined phrasal verb variously. Darwin and Gray [7] define phrasal verb as a combination of "a verb + particle or a verb + preposition that functions as a single verb, both parts giving up meaning in order to form a new lexical item" (pp. 65). Gardner and Davis [8] have identified phrasal verbs with two main elements: an open class item (verb) and a closed class object (particle) which are called the multi-word basis of lexis and grammar. They point out that phrasal verbs located on the interface create syntactic and semantic aspects. Many researchers [9-11] assert that phrasal verbs appear commonly in written and formal English. Likewise, Fletcher [9] claims that phrasal verbs can appear in all genres of writing and play as an effective tool to convey the writer's message. In brief, phrasal verbs are understood as a combination of two or more words, and their main elements of phrasal verbs are an open class item and a closed class object which are called the multi-word basis of lexis and grammar.

Although English phrasal verbs are commonly used because of their flexibility, practicability, adaptability, and efficiency [12], non-native speakers have difficulty in absorbing them due to permeability [5, 7]. Additionally, phrasal verbs have a wide range of variability in syntax and semantics, which can challenge ESL/English as a foreign language learners [13]. De Cock [3] describes that ESL/English as a foreign language learners' difficulties in using phrasal verbs include confusion in the correct use of verbs as well as right-hand particles, transitive and intransitive phrasal verbs, and prepositional verbs due to the syntactic nature of phrasal verbs. In terms of semantic properties of phrasal verbs,

ESL/English as a foreign language learners find it difficult to master phrasal verbs due to the complex construction of phrasal verbs, their idiomatic meanings [14], and multiple meanings [15]. As for the formality and informality of phrasal verbs, phrasal verbs are used most often in both formal spoken and written contexts; however, they are also common in academic contexts [10]. Fletcher [9] states that phrasal verbs are the most appropriate structures for expressing certain concepts in various settings, notably formal contexts, notwithstanding the low use frequencies of phrasal verbs in academic discourse. In light of the fact that proper phrasal verb use in a speech is a sign of proficiency in production [16], and often without phrasal verbs it is impossible to communicate in English; it is important to encourage language learners to employ these word combinations within situations [5]. Within this study, difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing in terms of syntactic properties, semantic properties, differentiation between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, and formality and informality are adopted as this research focus.

Previous studies have been conducted with the aim of discovering difficulties in learners' phrasal verb use in different contexts. Internationally, Mohammed [14] researched English learners' avoidance of phrasal verb in a secondary school in Iraq. The study was conducted with the participation of 40 students answering the questionnaire. The findings were that students did not know how to make up proper phrasal verbs, and they could not remember the meanings of phrasal verbs in each situation. The study was carried out by Ryoo [17] who wanted to clarify phrasal verbs. Using a database of 257 essays from various essay competitions written by Korean students, the study found that the four most commonly used verbs in academic writing (e.g., GO, COME) and particles (e.g., UP, OUT) were nearly identical and more than half of the top 20 verbs are identical. Shareef [18] conducted a study exploring secondary school English as a foreign language students' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in Sudan. A group of 40 students

partook in doing a test and questionnaire. The findings were that English as a foreign language students encountered difficulties in using phrasal verbs. In the context of Vietnam, Nguyen and Phan [19] did a study to evaluate the applicability of the cognitive method to teaching phrasal verbs in order to resolve the majority of students' semantic issues. The study design was quantitative and compared two groups of English majors. The findings were that the experimental group outperformed the control one in predicting the meanings of unknown phrasal verbs. Tran and Tran [11] carried out a study analysing the use of phrasal verbs in research proposals by graduate students. AntConc software was used for data analysis. The results were that graduate students tended to utilize various subcategories of phrasal verbs in terms of syntax and semantics. Nonetheless, the use of transitive and inseparable phrasal verbs along with fully idiomatic Greek words and phrasal verbs with semi-idiomatic were used more by graduate students. In brief, it is noticed that although many aspects of phrasal verbs have been investigated in different aspects; however, there is a scarcity of research examining the difficulties in phrasal verb use in academic writing, especially by Vietnamese English as a foreign language learners. Accordingly, this study aims at filling in this research gap.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Site and Participants*

The mixed methods study was conducted at a tertiary institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This institution offers various training programs, one of which is Bachelor of Arts in English. English majors have to take courses of English language skills in the first two years. Regarding the courses of writing skills, English majors have to take Writing 1, 2, 3, and 4, each of which consists of three credits (45 periods) lasting nine weeks. English majors have to study from basic writing (sentence writing) to advanced writing (essay writing) in those courses of writing skills. Additionally, grammar (including the use of

phrasal verbs) and vocabulary are introduced to English majors in those courses.

The participants were 114 second-year English majors taking part in this study, and they were sampled based on a convenience sampling approach. They took the course of Writing 4, and they had to write different essays within this course. Participants reported that they have been learning English for different periods of time. Sixteen students (28.8%) had about 6 to 8 years' experience in learning English; 20 (16.6 %) students learned English from 8 to 10 years; and 88 (70.4%) learned English for over 10 years. Regarding practicing English writing out of class, most English majors (95.9%) spent from 30 to 60 minutes practicing English writing. Only five (4.1%) English majors spent more than 60 minutes on their practicing English writing. Among 114 participants, 20 of them were invited to partake in the interviews based on their willingness.

### 3.2. Research Instrument

The study employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interview for data collection. The closed-ended questionnaire features two main sections: Section A seeks respondents' background information; Section B contains 13 five-point Likert scale items (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) addressing respondents' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing in terms of four components, namely syntactic property (4 items), semantic properties (4 items), differentiation between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs (3 items), and formality and informality of phrasal verbs (2 items). The questionnaire was adapted from Mohammed's [14] study as it is in alignment with the current research focus. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese so that respondents could not have any difficulties in answering the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was 0.85, which means the questionnaire was very reliable. The semi-structured interview was designed based on the information in the questionnaire to obtain in-depth information about English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in

academic writing. It contains four main questions which were first designed in English, then translated into the respondent's mother tongue to assure that respondents would not have language barriers in answering the interview questions.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Before the main study, a pilot study was conducted to try out the instruments. Then, the modification to instruments was made. After that, the main study proceeded officially. One hundred and fifty copies of the questionnaire were administered to English majors in person during break time, and it took them around 15-20 minutes to answer all the questionnaire items. The returned copies of the questionnaire were double-checked, and 124 copies of the questionnaire were valid and accepted for data analysis. After one week, 20 respondents were invited to take part in the semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and recorded for later analysis with the interviewees' permission.

With respect to the data analysis, the SPSS software (version 20.0) was employed in terms of descriptive statistics (Mean = M; Standard deviation = SD). The interval scale was interpreted as 1.00-1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: Disagree; 2.61-3.40: Neutral; 3.41-4.20: Agree; 4.21-5.00: Strongly agree. The qualitative data were analysed using the content analysis approach. First, the recordings were transcribed. Then, all the transcripts were carefully read and categorized in accordance with the research purposes. Finally, themes were generated. Interviewees were coded as S1 to S20. The member-checking and intra-rating were conducted to make sure that the data analysis was valid and reliable.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

English as a foreign language students' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing.

There are four categories of difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing. Table 1 shows that the total mean score of English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing is 3.78 (SD=0.67) out of five, which means research participants faced difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing. Specifically, semantic properties of phrasal verbs were the most popular problems

(M=3.9; SD=0.59), followed by difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs (M=3.74; SD=0.69) and formality and informality of PVs (M=3.80; SD=0.80).

Syntactic properties of phrasal verbs tended to be the least difficult for English majors (M=3.69; SD=0.61).

Table 1. English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing

	Difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing	N=124	
		M	SD
1	Difficulties in syntactic properties of phrasal verbs	3.69	0.61
2	Difficulties in semantic properties of phrasal verbs	3.90	0.59
3	Difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs	3.74	0.69
4	Difficulties in formality and informality of phrasal verbs	3.80	0.80
	Average	3.78	0.67

#### *English majors' difficulties with syntactic properties of phrasal verbs*

The results in Table 2 present English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing in terms of syntactic properties. English majors encountered difficulties in "[remembering] the verbs that must be followed by the correct prepositions"

(item 4: M=4.04, SD=0.61). In addition, they agreed that they experienced difficulties in using "the proper particles for each verb in different situations" (item 1: M= 3.59; SD=0.63) and "transitive/intransitive PVs correctly" (item 2: M= 3.59; SD=0.66), and putting "the particles in the correct position in phrasal verbs" (item 3: M=3.53; SD=0.91).

Table 2. English majors' difficulties with syntactic properties of phrasal verbs

No.	Difficulties with syntactic properties of phrasal verbs	N=124	
		M	SD
1	It is difficult to use the proper particles for each verb in different situations	3.59	0.63
2	It is difficult to use transitive/intransitive phrasal verbs correctly	3.59	0.66
3	It is difficult to put the particles in the correct position in phrasal verbs	3.53	0.91
4	It is difficult to remember the verbs that must be followed by the correct prepositions	4.04	0.61

The findings of the interviews corroborated the information from the questionnaire. Interviewees shared that they had many difficulties in remembering the verbs which should be followed by the correct prepositions because they did not realize whether verbs need a preposition or not.

I cannot use appropriate phrasal verbs in my writing, nor can I pick a correct preposition for

the main verb, or the verb for the preposition, so I prefer to use single verbs (S2).

I cannot remember a large number of phrasal verbs, and neither can I express my ideas with the correct phrasal verbs (S4).

#### *English majors' difficulties with semantic properties of PVs*

Table 3 illustrates English majors' difficulties with the semantic properties of

phrasal verbs. English majors strongly agreed that they encountered difficulties in remembering the multi-meanings of phrasal verbs (item 6:  $M=4.39$ ;  $SD=0.49$ ). Furthermore, they experienced difficulties in “[remembering] the meaning of the three-word phrasal verbs” (item 7:  $M=4.02$ ;  $SD=0.42$ ), “[understanding]

the particles whose meanings are completely different from the literal meaning” (item 8:  $M= 3.60$ ;  $SD=0.74$ ), and “[remembering] the phrasal verbs whose meanings are completely different from the literal meaning” (item 5:  $M=3.73$ ;  $SD=0.71$ ).

Table 3. English majors’ difficulties with semantic properties of phrasal verbs

No.	Difficulties with semantic properties of phrasal verbs	N=124	
		M	SD
5	It is difficult to remember the phrasal verbs whose meanings are completely different from the literal meaning	3.73	0.71
6	It is difficult to remember the multi-meanings of phrasal verbs	4.30	0.49
7	It is difficult to remember the meaning of the three-word phrasal verbs	4.02	0.42
8	It is difficult to understand the particles whose meanings are completely different from the literal meaning	3.60	0.74

The finding from the questionnaire was supplemented by that from the interviews. Many interviewees (e.g., S1, S3, S9, S15, S16, S17, and S18) said that they found it difficult to remember the multi-meanings of phrasal verbs and the meaning of the three-word phrasal verbs. For example:

A verb with a new preposition creates a new meaning or entire meaning. I cannot remember their meanings (S9;

I avoid using phrasal verbs in writing owing to the unpredictability of their meanings (S18).

*English majors’ difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs*

Table 4 displays English majors’ difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs. They agreed that they found it difficult to “distinguish between PVs and prepositional verbs” (item 9:  $M=3.79$ ;  $SD=0.54$ ), “recognizes why PVs can act as prepositional verbs” (item 11:  $M=3.75$ ;  $SD=0.73$ ), and “understand how phrasal verbs are different from prepositional verbs” (item 10:  $M=3.68$ ;  $SD=0.80$ ).

Table 4: English majors’ difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs

No.	Difficulties in differentiating between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs	N=124	
		M	SD
9	It is difficult to distinguish between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs	3.79	0.54
10	It is difficult to understand how phrasal verbs are different from prepositional verbs	3.68	0.80
11	It is difficult to recognize why phrasal verbs can act as prepositional verbs	3.75	0.73

The data collected from the interviews and those from the questionnaire are comparable. Interviewees (e.g., S3, S7, S9, S12, S16) said that they found it difficult to differentiate between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs.

I cannot differentiate phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs in my writing because there are plenty of them in English (S9);

I know phrasal verb is a combination of a verb and a preposition, but the meaning is not

related to the main verb. This causes me a lot of time to study, and I have not succeeded in learning them. So, I have no idea about prepositional verbs (S12).

*English majors' difficulties in formality and informality of PVs*

Table 5 indicates English majors' difficulties in the formality and informality of phrasal verbs. English majors reckoned that they had difficulties in using phrasal verbs formally in a written context (item 12: M=3.83; SD=0.72) and informally in a written context (item 13: M=3.66; SD=0.80).

Table 5. English majors' difficulties in formality and informality of phrasal verbs

No.	Difficulties in formality and informality of phrasal verbs	N=124	
		M	SD
12	It is difficult to use phrasal verbs formally in a written context.	3.83	0.72
13	It is difficult to use phrasal verbs informally in a written context.	3.66	0.80

Phrasal verbs can have a symbolic meaning, making them hard for me to understand. I cannot tell the meaning of phrasal verbs just by looking at the two or three words used, so I use phrasal verbs in writing but not very often (S20).

#### 4.2. Discussion

This study has unraveled English majors' difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing. They agreed that the syntactic properties of phrasal verbs could be a challenge in their academic writing. They found it difficult to remember the verbs that must be followed by the correct prepositions because they may not realize that a verb is a prepositional verb that needs to be followed by a preposition or not. It was concluded that English majors seemed to get confused when choosing appropriate words in terms of phrasal verbs. This finding was supported by the ideas of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman [5] and Mohammed [14] who have stated that students who did not know how to make up proper phrasal verbs could find it difficult to master the use of phrasal verbs because of the syntactic structures of phrasal verbs. As regards the difficulties with the semantic properties of

The data gained from the interviews support those collected from the questionnaire. Many interviewees (e.g., S4, S5, S6, S16, and S20) shared that it was not easy for them to use phrasal verbs formally in a written context.

Phrasal verbs can have several meanings. Therefore, using them in my academic writing may make the meaning of my sentence unclear. So, I prefer not to use phrasal verbs in writing (S5);

The meaning of a verb is different from the phrasal verbs. Therefore, I avoid phrasal verbs in formal writing and use single verb equivalents (S16);

phrasal verbs, research participants encountered difficulties in remembering the multi-meanings of phrasal verbs and three-word phrasal verbs. This is because many phrasal verbs with more than one meaning are not always similar to the single verb in the context. Phrasal verbs change drastically when combined with different particles [20], so it may not be easy for English majors to remember phrasal verbs.

Regarding difficulties in the formality and informality of phrasal verbs, English majors confessed that knowing how to use phrasal verbs formally and informally was challenging. Consequently, they seldom used phrasal verbs in their academic writing because phrasal verbs often have multiple meanings from literal meanings, which was hard for them to understand, and they only used simple language or single verbs in their academic writing. This finding is supported by scholars [5, 7] who have asserted that non-native speakers have difficulty in absorbing phrasal verbs. This finding is aligned with that of the study conducted by Huynh and Vo [21] who have found that phrasal verbs were avoided by Vietnamese students in academic writing.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has concluded that English majors encountered different types of difficulties in using phrasal verbs in academic writing in terms of syntactic, and semantic properties of phrasal verbs, differentiation between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, and formality and informality of phrasal verbs. Consequently, English majors found phrasal verbs difficult to understand, remember and use in their academic writing although they were aware of the importance of phrasal verbs in academic writing. Such findings can lead to some pedagogical implications. Firstly, these findings would suggest that students should be aware of the roles of phrasal verbs in academic writing so that they should create their own study plans to master phrasal verbs. Additionally, they should practice how to include the use of phrasal verbs in their academic writing gradually. Secondly, lecturers should instruct students on how to use phrasal verbs in academic writing and motivate them to use phrasal verbs not only in writing but also speaking. Lecturers should highlight phrasal verbs in other language skills such as reading and listening. Thirdly, administrators should design useful lists of phrasal verbs for both lecturers and students so that they can make use of phrasal verbs in teaching and learning. Moreover, updated textbooks with rich materials covering language exercises, and activities in relation to phrasal verbs should be designed to support students' phrasal verb learning and practice.

Some limitations of this study can be found. Firstly, the small sample size is likely to be one of the limitations because it might have an impact on the validity of the findings of the research. Secondly, only two research instruments were applied to collect quantitative and qualitative data in this research, which limited the number of collected data as well as the quality of the data. In a hopeful future, there should be studies which will look into students' perceptions about difficulties and reasons accounting for difficulties with phrasal verbs.

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