# Avoidance of phrasal verbs by learners of English: Definitional and methodological issues.

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## Introduction

Avoidance is a common phenomenon in language acquisition and language communication. Language learners may prefer simple, easy and familiar words, structures or topics over difficult, complicated or uncertain ones in order to prolong their verbal or nonverbal communication. On the one hand, avoidance is a type of negative strategy to prevent errors. On the other hand, it is a positive approach to continuing communication. Laufer and Eliasson (1993: 36) pointed out the practical didactic advantages of understanding this phenomenon by stating that "[a]ny description of learner language must account for avoidance."

Since avoidance was first revealed by Schachter in 1974, scholars have conducted relevant research in various fields from different perspectives (Tarone, 1977; Krashen, 1982; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Ellis, 1994; and Barekat & Baniasady, 2014, amongst others). A feature of English which many L2 learners find challenging is phrasal verbs (Barekat & Baniasady, 2014: 344). Their complex formation and the semantic transparency are easy to cause lexical avoidance. : The present paper provides a review of previous studies on the causes and classifications for avoidance in general first and then the avoidance of phrasal verbs in particular. The purpose is to reflect on some doubts with regard to the definition of phrasal verbs, knowledge and proficiency and test methods so as to give some proposals for the future research of phrasal verbs.

## Causes for avoidance

Avoidance is originally a linguistic phenomenon which was first studied in the realm of second language acquisition by Schachter (1974), who recognized it in her research on the writings of English learners with four different native languages. She argued "if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it"(Schachter, 1974: 213). Her findings not only revealed the strengths of contrastive analysis and the weaknesses of error analysis in predicting the difficulties in language learning but also drew the researchers' attention to avoidance phenomenon in English learning and language communication.

Researchers had different views on the causes of avoidance as a linguistic phenomenon. Some (e.g. Levenston, 1971; Kleinmann, 1977, 1978; Chiang, 1980; Krashen, 1982; Seliger, 1989; Ellis, 1994; Liao and Fukuya, 2004) agreed with Schachter that structural differences between L1 and L2, difficulty and insecurity in expressing meanings led to avoidance. But others (e.g. Kellerman,

1977; 1986; Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Zhao, 1989; Li, 1996; Mattar, 2003; etc.) doubted the necessary connection between avoidance and underproduction of certain linguistic structures or the extraordinary power of contrastive analysis in predicting difficulties of language learning.

Kleinmann believed that "[t]o be able to avoid [...] presupposes being able to choose not to avoid" (1977: 365). But his study confirmed what he later termed true avoidance, that is, the significant differences in the frequencies of the production of certain structures among subjects from different language backgrounds. His study not only proved that contrastive analysis was a fairly good predictor of avoidance, but also supplemented Schachter's findings by pointing out that learners' affective state, such as the degree of anxiety, confidence and desire to take risks, was also a factor in causing avoidance.

Li (1996) doubted whether Chinese learners consciously avoid English relative clauses or subconsciously underproduce them. He asserted that 'underproduction' was different from 'avoidance' in that the former was the learner's subconscious behavior due to his or her lack of knowledge of relative clauses, while in the latter case the learner knew the existence of the rule(s) of relative clauses and understood that he or she needed to use the structure, but consciously or purposely chose to avoid it since he or she was afraid to make errors. Li also found there were some functional or pragmatic as well as syntactic differences between Chinese and English relative clauses.

Previous research reveals that avoidance possibly results from poor language proficiency, linguistic similarities or differences, individual affect, functional, semantic or pragmatic factors. It may be conscious or unconscious behavior; it could be either a passive compromise in ESL/EFL learning or an active coping strategy in language communication.

## Classifications of avoidance

Among the research which identified avoidance as a communicative strategy, the most important are Corder (1978/1983), Tarone (1977; 1981), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Brown (1994), and Dornyei (1995).

Corder (1978/1983) termed avoidance "macro-strategies", which were composed of "risk-taking strategies" and "risk-avoiding strategies". The former referred to a strong motivation or need to express one's meaning in a foreign language by means of paraphrasing, guessing, coining or borrowing from the mother tongue in spite of the difficulties and at the risk of making mistakes or failure of communication. The latter was about giving up target concepts or escaping from the risk of making an attempt to express oneself due to the insufficiency of suitable vocabulary or inabilities to convey message accurately in foreign language communication.

To Tarone (1977), communication strategy was defined as "used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual thought (p: 195)." It was made up of paraphrase, transfer and avoidance. But her further division of avoidance into topic avoidance and message abandonment was considered to be inappropriate for the analysis of monologues, such as writing.

In Faerch and Kasper (1983)'s opinion, "strategies are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p: 36). They centered on the different patterns of reduction in the study of avoidance, so the word "reduction" was substituted with the word "avoidance" for the strategy. They presented classification of formal or achievement strategies and functional or reduction strategies which showed similarities to risk-taking strategies and risk-avoiding strategies in Corder (1978/1983).

Unfortunately, the various classifications of avoidance are somewhat vague or similar in nature, hence not always practical. There is no doubt that avoidance in language communication is an active, positive and conscious strategy to overcome linguistic obstacles and to achieve success when it comes to communication. But if the learners overuse or depend overmuch on avoidance strategies, they would not make progress or master the target language in the end. As Ellis (1994) pointed out, the overuse of the avoidance strategy to make up for the lack of proficiency in the target language would cause an illusion where the subject felt noneed to acquire new knowledge of the target language.

## Avoidance of phrasal verbs

Kamimoto et al. (1992) proposed that "[i]n order to be able to establish whether avoidance is a feasible explanation for relative underproduction by a group of learners, it is necessary to look at the first language form, distribution and function of the entity supposedly being avoided in the L2 as well as the means being used to establish whether and to what extent the entity is already part of the L2 knowledge of members of that group (p: 251)". Brown (1994) saw four linguistic categories of avoidance – lexical avoidance, syntactic avoidance, phonological avoidance, and topic avoidance. Since the phrasal verb structure is a peculiarity of the Germanic languages, (Dagut and Laufer, 1985: 78), phrasal verbs have received much attention and were classified as lexical avoidance.

Dagut and Laufer(1985) examined the performance on phrasal verbs and the frequency of avoidance in literal, figurative, and completive phrasal verbs types among three groups of intermediate Hebrew ESL learners by means of three tests (a multiple-choice test, a verb translation test and a verb-memorizing test). Their conclusion was that ESL/EFL learners tended to avoid certain vocabulary or linguistic constructions only if they did not exist in their native language.

In contrast to Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijin and Marchena (1989) pointed out that, in spite of the fact that phrasal verbs exist in both English and Dutch , Dutch learners would still avoid phrasal verbs, not for structural reasons (as Dagut & Laufer's Hebrew learners did), but for semantic reasons. Their Dutch English learners did not avoid phrasal verbs categorically, but avoided idiomatic ones as they felt them too Dutch-like for lack of L1-L2 contrast. This suggests that both the structural differences and similarities between L1 and L2 are responsible for the avoidance. In addition, the intermediate learners tended to adopt a play-it-safe strategy by preferring multi-purpose one-word verbs with general meanings to special-purpose phrasal verbs with specific, or even idiomatic, meanings.

Based on Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Hulstijin and Marchena (1989), Laufer and Eliasson (1993) found that phrasal verbs were not avoided by Swedish learners of English even though their native language contains phrasal verbs.. Since neither L2 complexity nor L1-L2 similarity resulted in the avoidance of phrasal verbs, they reached a conclusion that the best predictor of avoidance was L1-L2 difference (Laufer and Eliasson, 1993).

Irujo (1993) studied phrasal verbs and their role in idiom avoidance. She didn't believe that the avoidance of phrasal idioms was due to the structural differences since "all languages have idioms (Irujo, 1993, 207)". Based on Henzl (1973), Kellerman (1977, 1983), Jordens (1977) and Irujo (1986a, 1986b), Irujo (1993) investigated whether, what and how idioms would be avoided by bilingual Speakers of Spanish and English. They showed that these subjects did not avoid but in fact produced many English idioms. What's more, those English idioms which had identical Spanish equivalents were used correctly. But no evidence indicated that "subjects would use more idioms that are frequently heard and semantically transparent and fewer colloquial idioms (Irujo, 1993, 205)".

Laufer (2000) also focused on the avoidance of idioms and introduced a three-dimensional framework of comparison and four degrees of similarity between L1-L2. The aim of her study was to investigate the relationship between avoidance of L2 (English) idioms and the degree of similarity to their L1 (Hebrew) counterparts. Analysis showed that idioms as a category were not avoided. Furthermore, L2 proficiency was a factor in idiom avoidance and avoidance of specific idiom types was related to degrees of L1-L2 similarity. (Laufer, 2000, 186)

Liao and Fukuya (2004) conducted a study with Chinese learners of English (Chinese does not contain phrasal verbs). They found that proficiency level played a role: intermediate Chinese learners showed avoidance but the advanced learners did not. What's more, due to their semantic and/or syntactic difficulties, figurative phrasal verbs were adopted much less than literal ones. Result by Zhang (2007) showed a similar trend. Guo (2013) found that Chinese learners did not show the tendency to avoid using phrasal verbs even though there was significant difference in the use of phrasal verbs between Chinese learners and native English speakers. They claimed that it was the inherent complexity of English along with the teaching order of English phrasal verbs rather than the difference between Chinese and English that led to the difficulty in the use of phrasal verbs.

Ghabanchi and Goudarzi (2012) and Sara and Mohammadreza (2013) investigated the avoidance behavior of Iranian learners of English when using phrasal verbs. Their results strongly agreed with those of Liao and Fukuya (2004) although Ghabanchi and Goudarzi found that test type and phrasal verb type affected learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs, while proficiency level did not affect performance. Sara and Mohammadreza found no relationship between avoidance behavior of participants and the test types.

In contrast, Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) focused on native and nonnative use of multi-word vs. one-word verbs. Through corpus analysis they showed that one-word verbs are often more frequent in both written and spoken discourse. They also found evidence that non-natives were less likely to use multi-word verbs than native speakers in informal spoken contexts.

In summary, the above studies produced somewhat contradictive and confusing results in that there was no agreement on the factors influencing avoidance, whether they were linguistic such as L2 complexity, degree of the difference or similarity between L1-L2, L2 proficiency or technical such as teaching order, test type, phrasal verb type, play-it safe strategy, or language users' preference.

## Four issues

Despite much progress as well as clear tendencies in the field, several issues deserve further consideration. First of all, the definition of phrasal verbs as well as that of knowledge and proficiency requires some attention. Without some standardized definitions in these fields, methodological insecurities will keep rearing their heads. A final, but equally important, issue is that of test methods.

### *1. Definition of phrasal verbs*

The phrasal verbs which were studied in the previous research ranged from multi-word verbs to idioms. Some were prepositional, others were non-prepositional. Some had alternative single-word equivalents or near-equivalents, others not. Furthermore, which phrasal verbs were semantically transparent, semitransparent or semantically opaque was up to different researchers. In addition, the number and the complexity of phrasal verbs remained non-uniform in the research. Methodologically, this makes investigations on what should be the same topic difficult to juxtapose. Difference in the conclusions and analysis so far can often be attributed to this variation in definitions.

Preference for a certain word or linguistic structure varied for different languages or persons. That is to say, which phrasal verbs in so large a number of candidates could be chosen for the research differed among the researchers. As a result, phrasal verbs were actually adopted randomly for the research, which no doubt discounted the validity and credibility of the research results. It might be possible that the results would not have been the same if different phrasal verbs had been selected in the same research. So which phrasal verbs are typical or peculiar enough to be used in the research still demands further exploration.

### *2. Definition of knowledge*

Some researchers (e.g. Kleinmann, 1977, 1978; Dagut and Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Laufer, 2000) believe that avoidance occurs only with some sort of prior knowledge as a precondition. Besides Kleinman (1977), Laufer (2000) also mentioned: "avoidance presumes some knowledge of the target feature and a choice to replace it with an alternative which is perceived as less difficult and less error prone" (p. 186). Nevertheless, there seems to be no uniform definition of this prior knowledge in the existing studies.

The phrasal verbs were "assumed" to be the subjects' prior knowledge by Dagut and Laufer as they were "teachers of EFL in Israel"(Dagut and Laufer, 1985: 75; 78). In Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), however, those phrasal verbs confirmed taught by the English teachers, covered in the textbooks or marked known by the subjects were known due to prior knowledge (p: 246). According to Coady (1993), "Knowing a word involves: Knowing the degree of probability of

when and where to encounter a given word and the sorts of words to be found with it, the limitations imposed on it by register, its appropriate syntactic behavior, its underlying form and derivations, the network of associations it has, its semantic features, its extended or metaphorical meanings, and so on (p: 13)". So what is in a textbook or taught by the teacher may not necessarily be known or grasped by the students. What's more, the subjects might be unable to distinguish between which they can recognize and which they can use. Some would even mark as known those they actually did not know so as not to be scolded by the teacher.

Knowledge is somewhat hard to define. As Laufer and Eliasson (1993) held, "Complete ignorance and full-fledged knowledge are states of mind and are seen here as the end points of a scale or continuum relating to the amount of mentally stored or memorized information in a given area. Avoidance, on the other hand, is a strategy or process for handling information and can apply anywhere along this scale (p: 36)". Both the language learners who are ignorant of certain linguistic structures at one end of this scale and the native speakers who have a perfect command of these structures at the other end could unconsciously or consciously employ avoidance in their communication, as well as those in the middle of the scale.

### *3. Definition of proficiency*

The subjects in the previous research were either at intermediate or advanced level of ESL/EFL proficiency. However, there has been no universally accepted standard for the levels of ESL/EFL proficiency until now. A quick glance at investigations by Dagut & Laufer (1985), Hulstijn & Marchena (1989), Laufer & Eliasson (1993), Liao & Fukuya (2004), Siyanova & Schmitt (2007), Sara & Mohammadreza (2013), Ghabanchi & Goudarzi (2012) shows that the following approaches to establishing proficiency were employed: (1) the subjects' education stages, (2) the Cambridge First Certificate of Proficiency, (3) TOEFL, (4) the amount of exposure to native-speaking environments, (5) the time subjects spent learning English, (6) Quick Placement Test or even (7) researchers' personal estimation.

It is therefore hard to say that the intermediate level of ESL/EFL proficiency in one research is equal to that in another. Hence the results of their research may not be comparable since it might turn out that the intermediate proficiency level in one research was actually higher or lower than that in another. To some extent, this could in fact lead to confusing or misleading consequences.

### *4. Test methods*

A final relevant issue is methodological; the variation in test methods employed by previous researchers. Interestingly, these studies appear to be self-replicating to a degree. The test methods they adopted were almost the same, that is, a multiple choice test, verb translation test and a verb memorizing test with sentences, dialogues or paragraphs.

But the question is whether these elicitation tasks were really as effective as intended. As Kamimoto et al. (1992) claimed, "[a]gain we are left to wrestle with the problem of deciding whether the elicitation format truly elicits avoidance, especially as Chiang (Chiang, 1980) himself recognizes that preference for a particular structure is not the same as that structure being obligatory in a particular environment (p: 259)". Subjects on the tests might have been controlled, interfered or confined so that the phrasal verbs they chose were not necessarily those

they actually used for their communicative needs. Anyway, in a natural context, it is not the case that phrasal verbs should always be used prior to one-word verbs. Multi-word verbs are usually colloquial in tone and are a specific feature of informal spoken discourse, according to Siyanova and Schmitt (2007: 119). The methodology by Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) seems to be particularly objective, by the way.

## Conclusion

Avoidance in L2 learning is one of the strategies learners may resort to in order to overcome a communicative difficulty (Laufer and Eliasson, 1993: 35). Since phrasal verbs are perceived as one of the most difficult aspects of English language acquisition, their complexity and peculiarity contribute to the significance in avoidance research. Previous exploration of this theme focused on causes and features of avoidance behavior in regard with the various proficiency levels of EFL/ESL learners and the different degrees of semantic transparency of phrasal verbs. However, this previous research has been inconsistent in its definition of key terms and in methodological choices.

Above all, there do not seem to be widely accepted criteria for defining Phrasal Verbs and of establishing what constitutes Knowledge and Proficiency. In addition, more objective and feasible test methods such as the corpus-based analysis need to be put forward and applied to ensure the quality and validity of the research.

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