

## The Study of Iranian EFL Learners' Performance in Separable and Inseparable Verbs and Prepositions

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Mohammad Taghi Hassani  
Assistant Professor  
Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch &  
Imam Hossein University, Tehran  
dr.mthassani@yahoo.com

Azadeh Zarei Koshki  
Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch  
a.zareil360@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

The use of phrasal verbs is problematic for Iranian EFL learners. Accordingly, the present study investigated the performance of Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners in separable and inseparable verbs. The total population of the study was one hundred female Iranian EFL learners who studied English as foreign language in Kaj language institute in Qazvin, Iran. The participants were all female EFL learners and varied in age from sixteen to twenty. Out of a hundred EFL learners, fifty learners were selected to participate in the present study after the homogenization test (the vocabulary test). The homogenized EFL learners were divided into two intermediate and advanced groups. The instruments were English vocabulary and two posttests of separable and inseparable verbs. Paired-samples T-test was used for analyzing the collected data. The ultimate result of the present study showed that the Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners had a better performance on inseparable verbs in comparison with separable verbs.

**Key words:** Phrasal Verbs, Separable verbs, Inseparable Verbs

### Introduction

One of the major aspects of language skill is grammar. Nobody learns grammar in his or her own mother tongue through formal instruction. It is a natural phenomenon in first language acquisition. In order to be successful in the process of English language learning, the importance of grammar should be taken into consideration. Grammar is a vital element in every language because it is the glue that holds the language together. If grammatical structures are used in a dialogue or in a text incorrectly, they become meaningless and their messages will be vague; that is to say, in order for a conversation or a passage to be understood fully, it must have correct grammatical structure. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Grammar* (2001), grammar is defined as “the rules by which words change their forms and are combined

into sentences, or the study or use of these rules” (p. 619). Learning grammar of a language is crucial part for learning a language. In practice, grammar is very helpful for effective language learning. Grammar can be regarded as a "master" skill that enables learners to improve their competencies by using the phrasal verbs and prepositions.

According to Savage, Bitterlin and Price (2010), “grammar can be regarded as a necessary “master” skill that enables competence to develop in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When grammar is incorrect or misunderstood in any of these areas, communication may be disrupted, as the following examples illustrate” (p.2). They believe that grammar is a set of rules which should be memorized. Grammar refers to “a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the grammar language” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 251).

During the history of English language teaching, grammar has been studied by different researchers and there was a mixture of beliefs regarding grammar instruction. In fact, grammar was behaved differently from grammar-translation era to communicative approaches. Although some researchers such as Prabhu (1987) believe that grammar instruction should be relegated in the process of second language learning because it did not help to communicative approaches in general and actual use of language communicatively in particular, other investigators such as Lightbown and Spada (1990) and Nassaji (2000) focus on the importance of grammar and emphasize the need to include grammar instruction in communicative approaches. Definitely, grammar is the backbone of each language. In a nutshell, grammar provides a language learner with the structure that he/she needs in order to organize and put his/her messages and ideas across.

In this study, the focus was on phrasal verbs and prepositions which are the major parts of grammar that have significant roles in teaching and learning of English. As a matter of fact, phrasal verbs are very common in both written and spoken English. A phrasal verb consists of a verb and a preposition or adverb that modifies or changes the meaning. The word or words that modify a verb can be a particle. In other words, a phrase which is composed of a verb with a preposition or adverb can function as a verb whose meaning is different from the combined meanings of the individual words. For instance, the verb *give up* is a phrasal verb that means *stop doing* something, which is very different from *give*. Separable and inseparable verbs are subcategories of phrasal verbs. In the former, the object, when used as a pronoun, must come between the verb and the particle and in the latter, the object must always come after the particle or preposition.

### **Verbs in English grammar**

One of the main subcategories of grammar researches is the study of verbs. In general, there are different kinds of verbs in English language. Here, the present study focused on multi-word

verbs which are the most important verbs in English because most of EFL and ESL learners have serious problems to memorize and use them in oral and written skill of the language.

Multi-word verbs are different from other types of verbs because they are not composed of one single word. These verbs can be divided into three main groups, namely phrasal, prepositional and phrasal-prepositional verbs. In the following, the phrasal verbs will be described in details.

### **Phrasal verbs**

According to *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010), a phrasal verb can be defined as an idiomatic phrase including a verb and additional element, usually either an adverb or a preposition, that is, it is the combination of a base verb and a particle with both literal plus idiomatic meanings. In general, phrasal verbs consist of a verb and a particle (helper). The particle is typically a preposition and an adverb or a combination of a preposition and an adverb.

As an introductory definition of phrasal verbs, we can say, they can possess some extent of idiomaticity in the association of the verb and preposition (e.g. *cry over something*), or verb and separable particle (e.g. *run up the flag, run the flag up*), verb and inseparable particle (e.g. *run up a debt*) and finally, the double assembly of verb and particle and preposition (e.g. *face up to problems*) (Dirven, 2001).

The presentation of a definition of phrasal verbs has been difficult for researchers because phrasal verbs have many changeable explanations of their constructions. These differences in their description can due to the stress or the association of the particle with the verb and the following noun phrase. Also, the difficulty is due to the grammatical status of the particle (a particle should be an adverb or a preposition) in phrasal verbs construction.

According to Trask (1977), a phrasal verb is defined as “a verb consisting of a simple verb plus one or more particles, the meaning is no generally predictable from the meaning of the component part” (p.169). A phrasal verb consists of a verb and a preposition or adverb that modifies or changes the meaning. The word or words that modify a verb in this manner can also go under the name particle. In other words, a phrase combines a verb with a preposition or adverb or both and functions as a verb whose meaning is different from the combined meanings of the individual words. For instance, the verb *give up* is a phrasal verb that means *stop doing something*, which is very different from *give*.

Accordance to *Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* for learners of English, there are over 6000 phrasal verbs entries in both spoken and written English. Because of the uncountable numbers of these verbs, learning and memorization of phrasal verbs have been a problem for the EFL/ESL learners all over the world. Also, phrasal verbs are problematic for EFL learners because dictionaries do not always list them. Today, many scholars such as Khatib and Ghannadi (2011), Kharitonova (2013), Redmond (2013) and Saiya (2011) have focused on the importance

of phrasal verbs in communication in TEFL. The researchers believe that the English learners prefer not to use phrasal verbs because they are difficult to memorize. Regarding the actual use of language by native speakers of English, these kinds of verbs are used in spoken and written communication frequently so it is difficult for a native speaker of English to communicate with other people without using the phrasal verbs (Bolton, 2012).

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Table 1 List of a few examples of phrasal verbs researches

<b>EFL or ESL Learners</b>	<b>Researchers</b>
Iranian	Khatib & Ghannadi, 2011
Arab	Ayadi, 2010; Kharmah & Hajjaj, 1989
Chinese	Liao & Fukuya, 2002; Yan, 2010
Dutch	Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989
French	Redmond, 2013
Israeli	Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989
Malaysian	Akbari, 2009
Norwegian	Kharitonova, 2013
Russian	Kharitonova, 2013
Swedish	Laufer & Eliasson, 1993
Thai	Saiya, 2011

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### **Categorizations of Phrasal Verbs**

Some researchers such as Biber, Johansson, Leech, Finegan, and Conrad (1999) and Quirk, Svartvik, Leech and Greenbaum (1985) in the field of the study attempted to distinguish between multi-word verb (PVs, prepositional verbs, phrasal prepositional verbs), and free combinations. They categorized multi-word verbs into two categories i.e., syntactic and lexical unity and distinguished multi-word verbs from free combinations in accordance with syntactic and semantic principles.

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), A multi-word verb was defined as “a unit which behaves to some extent either lexically or syntactically as a single verb” (p. 1150) and “the meaning of the combination manifestly cannot be predicted from the meanings of verb and particle in isolation” (p. 1152). The researchers stated that the lexical unity of the PVs can be seen since the verb proper is unable to express the same meaning when its particle is deleted or replaced.

Also, multi-word verbs could be categorized into two main categories in accordance with their idiomatic status, namely semi idiomatic and highly idiomatic constructions (Quirk et al, 1985). They asserted that some phrasal verbs such as *come by* (acquire), *turn up* (make an appearance) are classified as highly idiomatic PVs as “there is no possibility of contrastive substitution: *come by/past/through; turn up/down*” (p. 1163). A semi-idiomatic construction is the second classification of multi-word verb. “It is variable but in a more limited way such as PVs *find out* (discover), *slacken off* (reduce pace/energy) in which the verb meaning is reserved, but the particle meaning is less easy to separate” (p. 1162).

According to Quirk et al (1985), other non-idiomatic constructions were not categorized as multi-word verbs as “the individual meanings of the components are apparent from their constancy in possible substitutions” (p. 1162). The authors asserted that these non-idiomatic constructions were free combinations rather than PVs. As a more comprehensive classification of PVs, these verbs can be classified into three semantic classes, namely literal, idiomatic and aspectual (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

With respect to their first classification, literal phrasal verbs have components that appear to retain much of their meaning. They illustrated it by giving an example; “the meanings of *sit* and *down* in *sit down* can be easily retrieved by combining the meaning of each of the elements (*sit + down*)” (p. 432). Regarding to their second categorization i.e., idiomatic PVs, such as *make up* (be reconciled), the usual meanings of *make* and *up* seem to be lost and the two elements (*make* and *up*) do not retain their common meanings.

And finally, the meanings of aspectual PVs are more transparent than those of idiomatic PVs, but perhaps not as transparent as those of literal PVs. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, (1999), aspectual PVs contain particles, which contribute consistent aspectual meaning to the verbs, and these aspectual PVs are further subdivided into “semantic classes depending on the semantic contribution of the particle” (p. 432). Their subdivisions of aspectual PVs include inceptive, continuative, iterative and completive which will not be explained in details in the present study.

### **Separable verbs**

Separable verbs have several ways of separating verb, particle and object. Also, with some separable verbs, the object can come before or after the particle. Usually, the object comes between verb and particle. For example, '*she looked up the word in her dictionary*'; '*she looked it*

*up in her dictionary'* and *'Switch the light off'*. In other words, when phrasal verbs are transitive and their objects are nouns, they can be separated, but when their objects are a pronoun, they must be placed between the verb and the particle.

### **Inseparable verbs**

The object in inseparable phrasal verb comes after the particle. For example, *'she got on the bus'* and *'we look after our grandchildren'*. Usually, intransitive phrasal verbs are inseparable. For examples: *'Come on, tell me about Nick'* and *'Hold on! What are you doing there?'* As Wishon and Burks (1980) stated, some transitive phrasal verbs are inseparable. The object is placed after the particle.

### **Inseparable verbs in comparison with separable verbs**

The comparison of separable and inseparable phrasal verbs have shown that the differences between them lie in spoken language; that is, the particle of separable phrasal verb usually receives more stress than the verb, but the particle of an inseparable verb does not. Also, it should be noted that two kinds of phrasal verbs arise when a short, one syllable pronoun like *me* and *you* is used as an object. The pronoun object is placed before a separable particle, and it is placed after an inseparable particle. As mentioned before, multiword verbs are classified into separable and inseparable verbs.

Dixon (1992) differentiates between separable and inseparable phrasal verbs regardless of whether the inseparable phrasal verbs can or cannot be separated. Although it is clear that the separable and inseparable phrasal verbs are different, Dixon categorizes inseparable phrasal verbs together with separable phrasal verbs which indicate that there is no distinction between these types of phrasal verbs.

In his study, Master (1996) focused on two main kinds of multi-word verbs; they were phrasal verb and prepositional verb. According to Master (1996), "a criterion for the phrasal verb is that the particle which is the element of the prosodic word which receives primary stress" (p. 308). On the other hand, in a prepositional verb, "the verb receives primary stress, and the particle which is considered as a preposition" (p. 310). He believed that phrasal verbs are classified into the two classifications i.e., separable and non-separable verbs. Also prepositional verbs should not be considered as separable verbs.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The total number of participants in this study was 100 Iranian EFL learners who study English as foreign language in Kaj language institute in Qazvin. They were all female EFL learners and varied in age from sixteen to twenty years old. Out of the whole population of the present study, 50 learners were selected to participate in the present study after the

homogenization test. Then, the learners were assigned to two intermediate and advanced groups in accordance with their levels.

### Instrumentation

The instruments of the present study were *English vocabulary in use* pre-intermediate and intermediate level tests for homogenizing the learners ; also this test was used as the pretest for both groups of the present study. Finally, the performance of the participants in the two tests of separable and inseparable verbs as the posttests for each group were compared to find out the performance of Iranian EFL learners in these verbs.

### Research procedure

The present study as a descriptive research was carried out through three stages; they were a vocabulary test i.e., placement test (the pretest), and a posttest for intermediate group and a posttest for advanced group. At first, the whole population was given the placement test. This vocabulary test consisted of thirty items. The participants had twenty minutes to answer to the items. After that, the collected scores were statistically analyzed . It should be noted that this placement test was considered as the pretest.

Having homogenized the participants, the researchers divided them into intermediate and advanced groups in based on their levels. In order to study the performance of the Iranian EFL learners in separable and inseparable verbs, two grammar tests of separable and inseparable verbs as the two posttests were administrated. Each of these tests consisted of thirty items. Also, the items of each of the test were composed of both inseparable and separable verbs; that is, even numbers were inseparable verbs and odd numbers were separable verbs. In order to understand and study the performance of the participants on separable and inseparable verbs, the above mentioned posttests on grammar were administrated to the groups. After the learners written their answers, the posttest scores were collected and analyzed.

### Results

In table1, descriptive statistics of the intermediate and advanced groups' scores in inseparable items (even numbers) and separable items (odd numbers) is presented.

Table 2: Descriptive Data of Intermediate and Advanced Groups

Group	Verb	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Intermediate	Separable	25	7.72	1.75	5	10
	Inseparable	25	8.80	0.91	7	10
Advanced	Separable	25	9.40	1.41	6	12
	Inseparable	25	10.96	1.62	8	13

The first research question sought to investigate the degree of difference between the performance of Iranian intermediate EFL learners on separable and inseparable verbs. To answer this question, a paired-samples t-test was run. As it is shown in *table 2*, there is significant difference between the performance of intermediate EFL learners on separable and inseparable verbs ( $t(24) = -2.571, sig < 0.05$ ). Also, the lower and upper limits of mean were negative undoubtedly. Hence, the mean difference of the two communities is smaller than zero and as a result, the mean of the inseparable verbs is greater than the mean of the separable verbs. It means that the EFL learners have a better performance in inseparable items (even numbers) in comparison of separable items (odd numbers) in the intermediate group.

**Table 3: paired-samples t-test**

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Lower	Upper			
			Mean	Interval					
Pair1	-1.0800	2.10000	.42000	-1.94684	-	-2.571	24	.017	

The second research question sought to study the degree of difference between the performance of Iranian advanced EFL learners on separable and inseparable verbs. Just like the first research question, a paired-samples t-test was run to answer the second question. As it is shown in *table 3*, there is significant difference between the performance of advanced EFL learners on separable and inseparable verbs ( $t(24) = -4.927, sig < 0.05$ ). Also, the lower and upper limits of mean were negative undoubtedly. Hence, the mean difference of the two communities is smaller than zero. In conclusion, the mean of the inseparable verbs is greater than the mean of the separable verbs. It means that the EFL learners have a better performance in inseparable items (even numbers) in comparison of separable items (odd numbers) in the advanced group.



**Table 4: paired-samples t-test**

	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig . (2-tail ed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair1	-1.5600 0	1.58325	.31665	-2.21353	- .90647	-4.927	24	.00 0

### Discussion

The goal of this research was to study Iranian EFL learners’ performance in separable and inseparable verbs. Common English dictionaries do not have complete list of the verbs and they are so prevalent in English culture and important to becoming fluent in English, so these verbs are difficult for EFL/ESL learners. Some phrasal verbs can have an object between the verb and a preposition or an adverb. In contrast, some phrasal verbs cannot have an object between the verb and a preposition or an adverb. The former refers to separable verbs. For example, "I *picked* my cousin *up* at the airport" and "call me *up*<sup>(s)</sup> tomorrow, Sarah ". “The symbol (s) indicates that an idiom is separable that a noun or noun phrase may be placed between the verb and the special preposition which called a particle” (Dixon, 1996, p.3).The latter refers to inseparable verbs. For instance, "I *called on* my cousin yesterday". One of the most important problems that EFL/ESL teachers encounter with the teaching these verbs is that there is no easy way to tell language learners which phrasal verbs are separable and which are inseparable. As an effective way, language learners could be given a list of inseparable and separable verbs. The ultimate result of the study showed that both groups (intermediate and advanced groups) have had better performance in inseparable verbs in comparison with separable verbs. The reason might be the ease of memorization of the inseparable verbs for the language learners. It can be concluded that English teachers and researchers pay more attention to separable verbs to remedy this shortcoming.

Although many studies have intended at shedding light on the effectiveness of different approaches to teach phrasal verbs, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has studied the performance of Iranian EFL learners in separable and inseparable. As an experimental study, Kamarudin (2013) tried to examine the level of understanding and use of English phrasal verbs amongst Malaysian learners of English. The findings of Kamarudin's study reveal that “in addition to learners’ proficiency level and gender, the nature of PVs and cross linguistic factors, particularly the learners’ L1, plays a significant role in Malaysian learners’ understanding and use of PVs. Their difficulties with PVs are further compounded as textbooks and dictionaries were also found to provide insufficient and inappropriate information with

respect to PVs” (p. ii). In another study, Hare (2010) examined the effectiveness of incidentally acquiring phrasal verbs and one-word verbs through second language reading with post-reading discussion activities. He found that:

One-word verbs and phrasal verbs were acquired almost equally with an exposure rate of eight unique occurrences in the written texts coupled with negotiation. Thus, phrasal verbs appear to be more easily acquired than previously thought. Considering the difficulties many students attach to learning phrasal verbs mentioned in the introduction, it is surprising to discover phrasal verbs were almost as easily acquired as one-word verbs in this study (p.100).

Phrasal verbs particularly separable and inseparable verbs are an unavoidable part of English as a foreign or second language. Therefore, it is important to be skilled at this part of English grammar. Accordingly, in an experimental study, Uhlířová (2013) attempts to analyze English phrasal verbs in pre-intermediate English second language textbooks. The purpose of Uhlířová's thesis is to recognize the most prevalent phrasal verbs introduced by textbooks. The results of the study listed the common phrasal verbs presented in 16 tables but as a final outcome, he found that “there are no significant differences between the numbers of phrasal and prepositional verbs present in the analyzed textbooks” (p. 41).

Mahmoud (2015) studied the use of the phrasal verbs by language learners who studied English as a foreign language and calls for a more realistic expectation. His research is proposed to identify the limitations inherent in the earlier researches. As a result, he commented that “most of these verbs (82%) were correctly produced, a finding that shows that phrasal verbs are not as problematic as they are portrayed in previous studies” (p. 261).

Phrasal verbs are problematic for EFL/ESL learners, so effective teaching phrasal verbs should be taken into consideration. Several studies have focused on teaching phrasal verbs in different levels by different methods. As an example, Büyükkarci (2010), focused on teaching phrasal verbs through communicative approach. He attempted to investigate the effects of communicative approach on teaching phrasal verbs to university students. In the study, it is revealed that how phrasal verbs differ from the other words and the traditional methods with communicative approach is compared. The results of the Büyükkarci's study revealed that “in the light of the literature on the methods and approaches that are used to teach phrasal verbs, it is clear that experimental group students who were taught phrasal verbs in communicative approach have shown a better performance and learning process which means that communicative approach is really effective in phrasal verb teaching” (p. 19). In another study with respect to the teaching phrasal verbs, Al-Sibai (2003) stated that texts and contexts can affect the students' vocabulary development. Learning vocabularies through texts and contexts is a long-term process in which meanings are gradually but increasingly stored.

## Conclusion

The ultimate result of the study showed that both groups (intermediate and advanced groups) have had better performance in inseparable verbs in comparison with separable verbs. As a result, there is significant difference between the performances of Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners on separable and inseparable verbs. In other words, the EFL learners had a better performance in inseparable items in comparison with separable items in the groups. The findings showed that teaching inseparable and separable verbs in any contexts to improve the process of learning and teaching in general and applying it on the Iranian EFL learners' performance in particular need special attention. It was found that separable verbs were more difficult than inseparable verbs for the EFL learners. So, Iranian teachers and researchers should work on separable verbs to improve the language learners' ability to use them proficiently.

The main implication of the present study is the importance of inseparable and separable verbs in foreign language learning. In order to be proficient at English grammar, teaching inseparable and separable verbs should be started from the elementary levels to higher education in our country. As the area of teaching English is very important especially in the present condition of requirement of English in Iran so, fluctuations and strategies are required to make sure learners' engagement in learning the phrasal verbs because they are problematic for EFL/ESL learners.

According to the findings of this study, the performance of Iranian EFL learners is different in inseparable and separable verbs. This can have implications for teaching these constructions and gradations in syllabuses. However, in this research, the sample size is very small, so the results cannot be generalized to other dissimilar population. Accordingly, it is recommended that future studies in the field of phrasal verbs could be performed on a larger sample size. Interested researchers could focus on other types of phrasal verbs such as three-word form or four-word form to see whether EFL/ESL learners' performance on these phrasal verbs are different or not.

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