Investigating and Classifying Errors in the Use of English Phrasal Verbs by Libyan University Students: A Semantic and Syntactic Analysis

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■ **Abstract:**

This study investigates the challenges faced by Libyan university students in the use of English phrasal verbs, focusing on semantic and syntactic aspects. Conducted during the 2018-2019 academic year at Zawia University, the research aims to identify and classify errors made by fourth-year students majoring in English. Data was collected through a multiple-choice test administered to 160 participants, encompassing questions across semantic, structural, and collocational dimensions of phrasal verbs. The findings highlight that while a significant number of students demonstrate moderate proficiency in phrasal verb usage, they encounter specific difficulties. These challenges include limited awareness of appropriate collocations and a tendency to interpret phrasal verbs based on the meanings of their constituent parts rather than as cohesive lexical units. Moreover, the study reveals that students struggle more with idiomatic phrasal verbs compared to literal ones. This research contributes valuable insights for educators and researchers in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), aiming to raise awareness of these issues and suggesting avenues for further investigation.

● **Key words**: phrasal verbs, semantic meaning, syntactic meaning.

■ المستخلص:

تناولت هذه الدراسة التحديات التي تواجه طلاب الجامعات الليبية في استخدام الأفعال المركبة في اللغة الإنجليزية، مركزة على الجوانب الدلالية والنحوية. أُجريت الدراسة خلال السنة الأكاديمية 2018–2019 في جامعة الزاوية، بهدف تحديد وتصنيف الأخطاء التي يرتكبها طلاب السنة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وتم جمع البيانات من خلال اختبار اختيار من متعدد أُجري على 160 مشاركًا، شمل أسئلة تتعلق بالأبعاد الدلالية والنحوية المتعلقة بالأفعال المركبة. أظهرت النتائج أن عددًا كبيرًا من الطلاب يظهرون مهارة متوسطة في استخدام الأفعال المركبة، لكنهم يواجهون صعوبات محددة. تشمل هذه التحديات الوعي المحدود بالتراكيب المناسبة والميل إلى تفسير هذه الأفعال استنادًا إلى معاني أجزائها المكونة بدلاً من اعتبارها وحدات لغوية متماسكة. علاوة على ذلك، كشفت الدراسة أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات أكبر في استخدام الأفعال المركبة الاصطلاحية مقارنة بالأفعال الحرفية. تسهم هذه الدراسة في تقديم رؤى قيمة للمعلمين والباحثين في مجال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، بهدف زيادة الوعي بتلك المشاكل واقتراح مجالات للبحث المستقبلي.

● الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفعال المركبة، المعنى الدلالي

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs are crucial in the English language, as highlighted by various researchers who have compiled lists of the most common ones (Cornell, 1985; McArthur, 1989; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). For instance, Cornell (1985) notes that everyday communication involves at least 700 common phrasal verbs, with around 3,000 established ones and hundreds of two-part verbs. Using phrasal verbs frequently brings foreign learners closer to native-like proficiency in English. Cornell emphasizes that learners' proficiency should be judged by their ability to master a substantial number of phrasal verbs. According to McArthur (1989:42), "phrasal verbs have become increasingly common since at least the 19th century, with a phenomenal increase in the 20th century." Mastering phrasal verbs poses a significant challenge in English language teaching, serving as a crucial indicator of learners' proficiency in the language (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

From my own journey as a student and later as a teacher, and in alignment with the views shared among the faculty at Zawia University, it is clear that

the Libyan educational system, especially at the university level, has not given sufficient attention to teaching phrasal verbs. This lack of emphasis undoubtedly hinders students' proficiency in using phrasal verbs effectively during their university studies.

1.2 The Problem

In my experience both as a teacher and a student at Zawia University, it is evident that many students in the English Department struggle with learning phrasal verbs. This challenge becomes particularly obvious when students are required to use them in practical contexts.

1.3. Research Questions

The study attempts to answer one main question:

● What are the predominant errors made by Libyan students in their use of English phrasal verbs?

1.4. Aims and Significance of the study

● The primary objective of this paper is to develop a taxonomy that categorizes errors in the usage of English phrasal verbs among Libyan students. This taxonomy will focus on semantic and syntactic dimensions.

● To provide insights that can aid educators and students within the English Department at Zawia University by raising awareness of these challenges and suggesting pedagogical strategies to address them.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the challenges faced by Libyan university students in using English phrasal verbs, specifically those studying in the English Department at the University of Zawia during the academic year 2018-2019. Several limitations are anticipated, including constraints related to sample size, time, resources, and participant responsiveness. Despite these challenges, the research endeavors to address them effectively and ensure robust findings. The research was conducted exclusively at Zawia University during the specified academic year, involving a sample of 160 fourth-year students. It examines the use of English phrasal verbs across two main areas: semantic understanding and collocational accuracy.

2. Literature View

2.1. Previous studies

English phrasal verbs are challenging for non-native speakers due to their idiomatic and often non-literal meanings. These challenges are particularly pronounced among learners whose first languages have different verb structures or lack phrasal verb constructs entirely. Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted worldwide to understand the specific difficulties faced by EFL learners in mastering phrasal verbs.

Al-Qudah (2012) conducted a study with 120 Jordanian undergraduate majors in English, focusing on their acquisition of English phrasal verbs. The research aimed to identify the levels of acquisition, types of errors, and factors influencing these among students. Results showed that 76.5% of students scored above 50%, indicating proficiency, with 32.5% scoring below 50%. Participants demonstrated stronger performance in the structural aspects of phrasal verbs. The study corroborated earlier findings, highlighting semantic and collocation as challenging areas for students. Proficiency level positively correlated with performance, while gender differences were negligible among students.

GarElzain (2012) investigated the usage of phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs among third-year university students at Sudan University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Languages. The study aimed to answer three research questions: the extent of awareness among Sudanese EFL students regarding these verb types, their attitudes towards using them, and which types they found most challenging. A total of 72 students participated randomly, undergoing a comprehension test with 25 items each on phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, alongside a questionnaire measuring awareness and attitudes using a five-point scale with eleven statements. Results indicated that most students held negative attitudes towards using these structures due to perceived difficulty and complexity, reflecting a lack of motivation. The study concluded that students generally struggled with both types of verbs.

Imrose (2013) investigated the challenges ESL/EFL learners face with phrasal verbs and suggest effective teaching methods. The conclusion

emphasizes that, despite the difficulties phrasal verbs present, implementing appropriate teaching strategies is crucial for enhancing learners' understanding and use of these expressions.

The study by Dukhayel (2014) explored how exposure duration impacts Arab ESL learners' preferences and usage of different types of phrasal verbs. The findings indicated that learners with long exposure used phrasal verbs significantly more than one-word verbs and preferred literal and semi-transparent phrasal verbs over idiomatic ones. Conversely, learners with short exposure avoided idiomatic phrasal verbs and used one-word verbs more frequently. The study concludes that avoidance of English phrasal verbs among Arabic-speaking learners is primarily due to limited exposure to the English-speaking environment, rather than L1-L2 differences or the semantic complexity of the phrasal verbs.

Al-Otaibi (2015) studied the use and avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners. The study involved 102 female EFL students and 71 English teachers and revealed that students tend to avoid using phrasal verbs, preferring their one-word counterparts, and highlighted teachers' somewhat negative perceptions regarding the importance of teaching phrasal verbs.

Algethami and Almalki (2016) studied the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners, focusing on how the type of phrasal verbs (literal vs. figurative) and the number of years spent learning English influenced this behavior. The study concluded that Saudi learners tend to avoid figurative phrasal verbs, using them far less frequently than native English speakers, while their use of literal phrasal verbs was comparable to that of natives. Furthermore, the study found that the length of time spent learning English did not significantly affect the learners' use or avoidance of phrasal verbs, with both 1st-year and 3rd-year students showing similar patterns.

Al Nasarat (2017) examined the difficulties that Jordanian college students face in interpreting English phrasal verbs (PVs). The study investigated two groups of learners: regular students majoring in English language and literature, and non-majoring students who study communication skills in English at Al Hussein Bin Talal University. The research identified the sources of weakness in interpreting PVs, whether orally or in written texts,

by assessing students' background knowledge and performance. The findings highlighted challenges in both translating and interpreting PVs and suggested that these difficulties could be addressed through better course design, effective classroom teaching, and improved curricula.

The study conducted by Azmar (2019) identified the difficulties faced by students in understanding English phrasal verbs. The research focused on third-year undergraduate students from the 2017 batch during the 2018/2019 academic year. Data was collected through a test administered to a class of twenty-five students, revealing that 68% of students received failing grades (D and E), 28% scored average (C), and 4% achieved a good score (B), with no students earning an excellent grade (A). The study highlighted weak mastery of phrasal verbs among students, with semantic and syntactic errors being significant challenges. The findings underscore the need for more effective teaching strategies for phrasal verbs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

By analyzing learners' errors we can collect information about the learners' output to examine their performance in phrasal verbs. Ellis (2003, p, 85) said that using error analysis methodology enables the researcher to study the language used by learners and the final results offer a rich contribution that can be reflected positively on improving the language pedagogies. By addressing the errors types and frequency, the researcher attempts to provide a considerable amount of information about the nature of these errors to draw the teachers and course designers' attention to the areas that should be addressed more carefully in the future to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of these errors, especially when learning phrasal verbs. In other words, it can be said that the analysis of students' errors can be helpful and significant for teachers, syllable designers and test developers. It leads professionals in the field to devise appropriate material and effective teaching technique.

In conclusion, various studies have been carried out in terms of the teaching and learning in addition to the avoiding problems of Phrasal verbs. The present study focuses on difficulties in using phrasal verbs by analyzing learners' errors. This work drives its importance from the importance of the topic in addition to the objectives it addresses. The obtained results are imperative as

they provide an understanding to the problem. These results can be used for further developments in language learning and language teaching alike. This study provides appreciable information about weak points to develop teaching materials. The few previous studies in the Arabic world and specifically in Libya have been conducted about problems encounter learners in translating phrasal verbs and learners' attitudes about phrasal verbs. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous study has tackled this area in Libya. Thus, this study is the first work in Libya that deals with phrasal verbs in terms of learners errors in the three areas of semantics, structures and collocations. It has been believed that the contribution of this study is of the kind of information provided about learners' errors and performance in phrasal verbs.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The participants in this study were the students at the English Department at Zawia University. They were 160 and constitute the whole number of the fourth year students. The average age of students was 23. They were 116 girls and 44 boys. This sample seems to be sufficient and serves the purpose of the study. The reason behind choosing this level is that the fourth year students at this stage are supposed to have had fair knowledge in the use of English phrasal verbs. They have learned the use of English phrasal verbs in the secondary school and they have also been exposed to phrasal verbs during different courses among the four years of studying at the University level. These students are about to graduate from English Department thus, they represent the educational aggregate of all students in the English Department. The study was conducted on April 2018.

3.3. Instruments of data collection

A. Pilot study

A pilot test was conducted two weeks before applying the main test of the study. Thirty students from the fourth year were selected randomly to participate in the pilot study. Accordingly, the researcher has made the following adjustments on the test, depending on the results and feedback of the participants in the study.

- There was a need to give an answered example before each question in the test.

● Alternatives of the given answers should be chosen more carefully, so that the alternatives overlapping will be avoided and the position of the correct answer was fixed in several items, so there was a need to change it randomly each time.

● Instructions of the test were not clear enough to be understood by all the students, so that they were rewritten and simplified carefully and one phrasal verb was used twice, so that the extra one was deleted.

● Time of the test was determined 35 minutes were enough to complete all the test items.

B. Test

A recognition (multiple-choice) test was designed by the researcher to detect errors made by students while using English phrasal verbs. The test is divided into two questions to assess the students' ability to use the English phrasal verbs correctly in two areas: semantics and collocations. Each question includes 10 items. The first question deals with the semantic area, the second question for the collocations.

1. Question 1: This question requires the students to choose the proper meaning of the underlined phrasal verb in each item which consisted of four given options.

2. Question two: In this question the students are asked to choose the correct preposition to complete the underlined phrasal verb. Each item is provided with four options.

The main test content of this study was adapted from different resources including: Cambridge learners' dictionary, Phrasal verbs of English, Acquisition of English phrasal verbs.

3.4. Procedure of the study

The pilot study aimed to demonstrate the necessity of the research and involved a small group of students, as previously described. The main test was then administered to education experts to ensure its reliability. Before applying the main test to the study's participants, it was tested on a group of students to assess its validity. The test was then given to all fourth-year

students in the English Department. The results were subjected to statistical analysis, followed by a discussion comparing them with the relevant literature.

3.5. Data analysis Procedure:

The collected results of the test were presented in tables which show error and correct answers' categories, in addition to percentages of correct and incorrect answers. The following data analysis procedures were applied in order to answer the two questions of the study.

1. Descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages), mean score technique.

2. Errors were described in the percentage table and the formula is shown as below.

3. The number of incorrect answers was calculated.

P = × 100%   **P** = Percentage   **F** = Frequency of wrong answer   **N** = Number of subjects

4. Error analysis technique was used in order to identify and classify students' errors.

5. The test was analyzed quantitatively.

In short, descriptive statistics including frequency analysis and percentages were used to analyze data of the test and to discuss the results as well.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1. Semantic Errors

Table (1) shows the frequency and percentage of errors in the first question regarding the semantic area of phrasal verbs.

Table 1: Semantic Errors.

Item No	Incorrect Responses	Percentage of Incorrect responses%
1	70	44%
2	70	44%

Item No	Incorrect Responses	Percentage of Incorrect responses%
3	32	20%
4	61	38%
5	103	64%
6	72	45%
7	99	62%
8	122	76%
9	56	35%
10	84	52%

Percentage of errors in the semantic area.

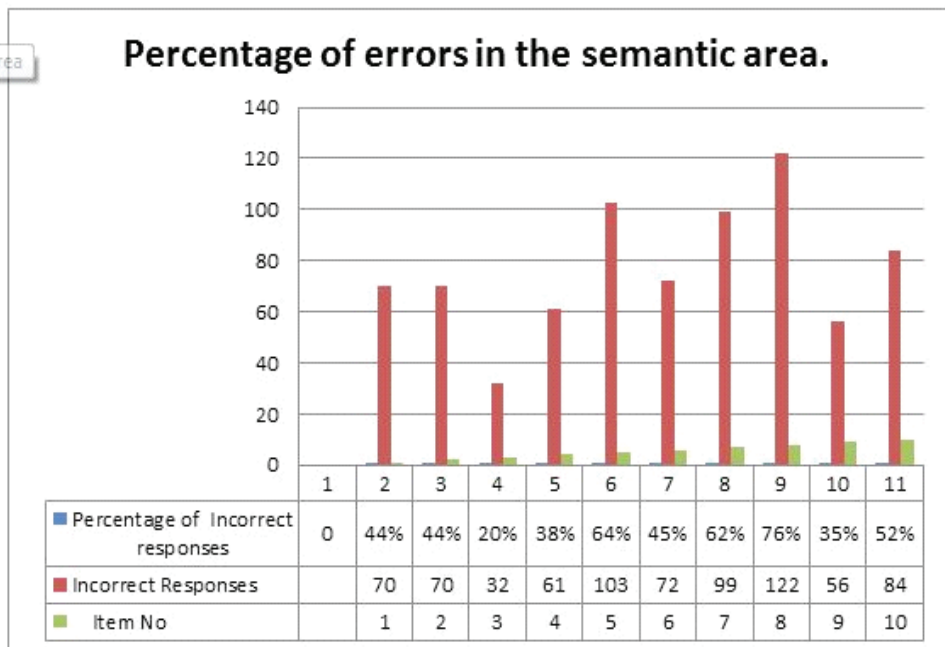|	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Percentage of Incorrect responses	0	44%	44%	20%	38%	64%	45%	62%	76%	35%	52%
Incorrect Responses		70	70	32	61	103	72	99	122	56	84
Item No		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Fig. 1: Results of Q1

According to the above two tables, the percentage of errors is more than 50% in four items of the test (5, 7, 8 and11). The percentage of errors is less than 50% in the rest six items in the test (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9 and 10). The percentages of errors are 44%, 20%, 38%, 64%, 45%, 62%, 76%, 35% and 52% respectively.

4.2. Collocations Errors

Table (2) shows the Frequency and Percentage of errors in the third question regarding area of collocation.

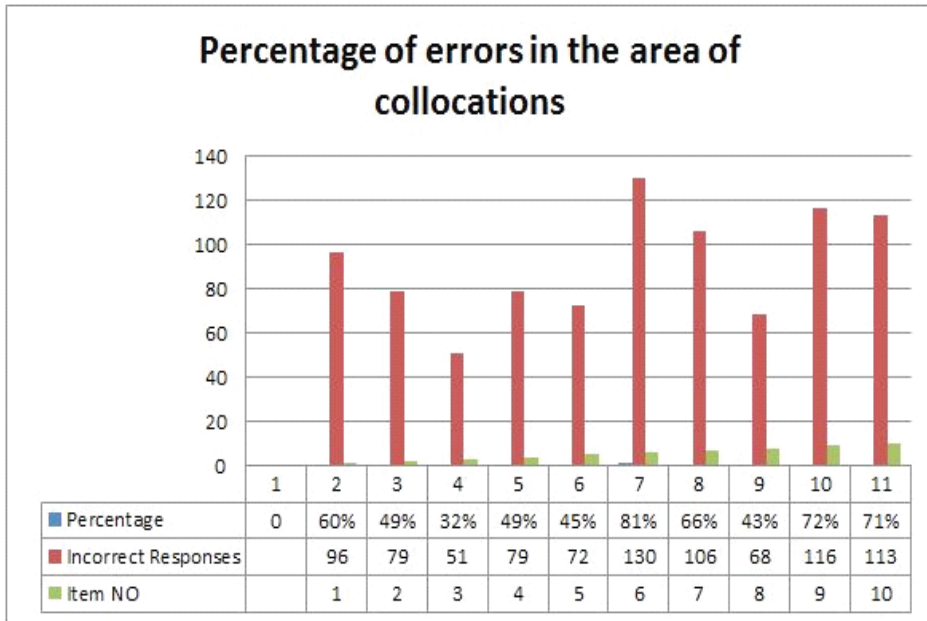| Item NO	Incorrect Responses	Percentage %
1	96	60%
2	79	49%
3	51	32%
4	79	49%
5	72	45%
6	130	81%
7	106	66%
8	68	43%
9	116	72%
10	113	71%

Fig. 2: Results of Q3

The two tables above indicate that the percentage of errors in items (1, 6, 7, 9 and 10) is more than 50% while it was less than 50% in the rest of the items in the test (2, 3, 4, 5 and 8). Percentages of errors in the previous category refer that some students fail to select the correct preposition that matches correctly with the given phrasal verb. The percentages of wrong answers are 81%, 72%, 70%, 66%, 60%, 49%, 45% and 42% respectively. This high percentages of errors in each item in the collocation area indicate that students encounter problems to identify the correct collocations and they had poor command regarding this area.

4.3. Discussion of results

This section of chapter four presents discussions and findings based on the results in the previous part of this chapter. It begins with a commentary of the findings of the study. Each research question and its results will be provided, followed by a comparison to previous studies.

The overall purpose of this study is to observe the learners' errors in using phrasal verbs. It also aims at investigating and classifying these errors in order

to identify types of problems that face fourth year students at the University level. Thus, in response to the first and second questions of the study regarding the most common errors that Libyan students at Zawia University make in using English phrasal verbs and the categories of illustration, the results indicate the following:

4.3.1. Area of collocation

The results presented in Table 4 highlight that 56% of errors occurred in the collocation area, marking it as the highest error percentage in the test among fourth-year students at the University of Zawia. This suggests that students struggle notably with selecting the correct particle to collocate with phrasal verbs. Table 3 further reveals that errors exceeded 50% in five specific test items, all of which feature idiomatic phrasal verbs such as "carry out," "hand in," "work out," "turn down," and "make out." Conversely, items where errors were less than 50% predominantly contained literal phrasal verbs. This underscores a trend where students encounter more challenges with idiomatic rather than literal phrasal verbs, despite their familiarity with the verbs tested. The difficulty in choosing the correct particle may stem from the complexity of idiomatic phrasing and the multiple options provided, which can confuse learners. Notably, Item 6 stands out with an 81% error rate, primarily attributed to confusion between "hand in" and "hand out," indicating a common misconception among students. Similarly, Item 9 saw significant errors in matching "work" with "out," highlighting unfamiliarity with the idiomatic use of "work out." Moreover, Item 6's "carry out" saw a 66% error rate due to confusion with "carry on," emphasizing the challenge of distinguishing between closely related idiomatic expressions.

4.3.2. Area of semantics

The results from Table 4 and Figure 4 reveal that semantics accounted for the second-highest error rate at 48%. This indicates that students generally face fewer challenges in inferring the correct meaning of phrasal verbs compared to selecting the particle that accurately conveys that meaning. Notably, students performed adequately in six out of ten phrasal verbs tested in terms of semantics, specifically excelling in items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 9, while struggling in the remaining four items, particularly items 5, 7, 8, and 10.

Figure 1 highlights that errors surpassed 50% in items 5, 7, 8, and 9, attributed by the researcher to the complexity of idiomatic phrasal verbs in these items. The difficulty in correctly choosing the meaning of these phrasal verbs suggests that students encounter more challenges with idiomatic rather than literal phrasal verbs. Many students tend to guess the meaning of these verbs based on their constituent parts, which often misleads them away from the correct interpretation.

Furthermore, Table 1 and Figure 1 underscore that item 8 garnered the highest error percentage at 76%. Students frequently misinterpreted "come across" as "look for" or "asked for," instead of its correct meaning, "discover by chance." This misunderstanding could stem from unfamiliarity with "come across" among some students and the presence of closely related alternatives that distract from the correct choice. Similarly, item 1 registered a 44% error rate, with students incorrectly opting for "finish" instead of "fill in," despite "fill in" being a well-known phrasal verb. This discrepancy suggests that some students rely more on contextual clues rather than understanding the precise meaning of the phrasal verb in isolation.

To summarize, the results of the test in this study indicate that students in the fourth year at Zawia University encounter some problems particularly, in the collocation area where most of the learners fail to choose the correct particle. This finding might be attributed to students' tendency to deduce the correct meaning of the phrasal verb depending on the meaning of the two parts. Some students deal with phrasal verbs as separated units rather than one linguistic unit.

Semantic area is ranked number two in the list of number of errors. Learner's Lack of knowledge about phrasal verbs and their UN familiarity with number of them seemed to be as essential effects in student's errors. Some students seem to be confused between the verbs. For instance, **hand in** with **hand out**, **carry out** with **carry on**. Results also indicate that students have the tendency to deduce the meaning of the phrasal verb from the context. Using the context has a negative impact on students' answers.

In conclusion, the study on Libyan students' challenges with English phrasal verbs aligns with previous research but reveals specific issues.

Like Jordanian students in Al-Qudah (2012), Libyan students struggle with semantic and collocational errors, especially in idiomatic phrasal verbs, a common challenge also seen in studies by Dukhayel (2014) and Al-Otaibi (2015). However, Libyan students' proficiency is lower, with a 43% error rate, possibly due to insufficient exposure and inadequate teaching strategies, as noted in Azmar (2019). Overall, the findings emphasize the need for improved curriculum and targeted instruction.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

On the basis of what have been presented and discussed in the previous chapter, the study arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The results of this study revealed that Libyan students encounter some problems when dealing with English phrasal verbs.

2. By analyzing the results of the test, students seemed to lack the collocation awareness. In other words, they failed to choose the correct particle that matches correctly with the given phrasal verb. However, phrasal verbs that were used in the test were well-known verbs and most of them were extracted from different materials that have been thought in the English department.

3. Semantic area is ranked number two on the list of frequency of errors. Students tend to depend on the meaning of the two separated parts of the phrasal verb rather than dealing with it as one lexical unit.

4. Results also show that Libyan students at Zawia University encounter more problems when dealing with idiomatic phrasal verbs than literal phrasal verbs. All the items that received more than 50% incorrect errors were idiomatic phrasal verbs such as (carry out, hand in, work out, turn off, and make out).

5. It has been noted that almost fourth Libyan students at Zawia University have moderate level of performance in using phrasal verbs. That is the total percentage of errors in all the two areas is (43%). Generally, it is less than (50%). But this level is not sufficient; it indicates the weakness of the materials and lack of concentration in teaching phrasal verbs

during the four years of studying English. As to fourth year students who are specialized in English they should have an advanced level of performance as they studied English for four years.

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