

# The Learning of Phrasal Verbs among Malaysian ESL Learners: A Sign-Oriented Approach

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## Abstract

Phrasal verbs have been identified as one of the most challenging linguistic items to be mastered by EFL and ESL learners. Previous studies in cognitive linguistics have illustrated that not only literal expression but each idiomatic expression of phrasal verbs is also analysable to certain extent, through its individual word analysis which contributes to the figurative meaning as a whole. This study aims to see if the exposure to the core meanings of the individual items that make up a phrasal verb (i.e. verb and particle) helps Malaysian learners to use phrasal verbs appropriately in English writings. There were two groups of students involved in this study. Each group (i.e., experimental and control) consisted of fifteen students. The experimental group was given semantic-based explicit (verbs and particles in phrasal verbs) instruction whereas the control group was engaged into traditional instruction by providing the meanings of the phrasal verbs extracted from the Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary. Students were instructed to write an essay during pre-test and post-test to see the improvement on the taught phrasal verb items. These students were also tested on novel phrasal verb items (i.e. different combinations of verbs and particles) which were not taught, before and after treatment to see if the instruction yields significant results. The inferential analyses through paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test for the taught items indicate that although both groups performed significantly better in post-tests compared to pre-tests, the experimental group which received the semantic-based explicit (verbs and particles in phrasal verbs) instruction outperformed (significantly) the control group which received traditional instruction. This suggests that the explicit exposure to the invariant meaning (which comprises conceptual metaphor) of individual signs that makes up phrasal verbs helps learners to assimilate the meanings to interpret the messages conveyed by the phrasal verbs as a whole, in all contexts. The results of this study support the sign-oriented approach where each linguistic item is perceived as a sign which carries a vague (unchanged) meaning which motivates the distribution of messages in every context of its occurrences (i.e. a sign is extended metaphorically from concrete 'spatial' messages to the more abstract realm of 'temporal' to the even more abstract realm of 'existential' message).

**Keywords:** phrasal verbs; invariant meaning; conceptual metaphor; semantic-based instruction; sign-oriented approach; cognitive semantics.

## 1. Introduction

Mastery of more than a language is indeed a necessity in Malaysia where Bahasa Malaysia is the national language of the country and English serves as its second language which means second in importance to Bahasa Malaysia (Ain Nadzimah Abdullah & Chan, 2003; Lee et al., 2010). Although being addressed as the second language, the importance of this *lingua franca* is inevitably crucial to bring the nation to move ahead to achieve the status of a developed country in the field of science and technology, commerce as well as internationalized education. English language provides indispensable resources around the world which enables its users to keep abreast of the world of information and technology. A mutually transformed nation needs to be equipped with knowledge of the world in order to venture into the globalisation arena.

However, the deterioration of the standard of English among Malaysians has prompted a generalisation that perhaps the change in the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in the beginning of 1970s is the root cause of this phenomenon (Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, 2010). It was seen as a light at the end of the tunnel when English was reintroduced as the medium of instruction but for the teaching of Science and Mathematics (PPSMI) in both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia in year 2003. Nevertheless, one needs to be clear with the goal of PPSMI as it was not to improve on the standard of English in Malaysia but to alleviate students' acquisition of knowledge in Science and Mathematics (Chooi, 2011; Jamal Hisham Hashim, 2011)

Unexpectedly, the students' achievements in these respective subjects particularly in rural areas were not convincing which then led the government to amend the policy where the national language was reinstated as the medium of instruction which was officially implemented in 2016 for primary schools and will be effective in 2021 for secondary schools. This is due to the fact that students are not proficient in the English language and therefore, mastering the subject matter with the language in which they are not proficient at might make the situation of acquiring knowledge even worse (Isahak Haron et al., 2008). Students' inadequate competency in English language does not end at the secondary level of their education but their lack proficiency in the language too affects their performance at post-secondary level, especially at polytechnics (Suhaily Abdullah & Faizah Abd Majid, 2013). This situation indirectly leads to a number of challenges to be faced by the students during their internship with potential employers (Ahmad Yasruddin Md Yasin et al., 2010).

In order to strengthen the English language proficiency, the government, in early 2010, has introduced the policy "Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening Command of English" that is also known as *MBMMBI* (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris*). Various transformation measures have been announced by the government in order to strengthen the command of English among the students especially by allocating more time for the subject to be taught by well trained teachers (i.e. teachers who are proficient in the language) (*New Straits Times*, 2011; *The Star*, 2010; *The Star*, 2014).

In one of the recent moves, the English language roadmap under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) introduced CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) as an agenda to reform the English language education in order to achieve the international standard (*Ministry of Education*, 2015; *The Star*, 2016). This is not only aimed at primary and secondary level of education in year 2017 but also at the post-secondary level to receive the CEFR cohort in another 5 years. At polytechnic level, English language is essential for the graduates to secure a job as TVET (Technical, Vocational, Education and Training) "holds the key towards driving the engine of industrial and economic growth in the competitive global market" (*The Star*, 2017:1). This is very likely to impact on the teachers or instructors as more responsibility is deemed necessary to upgrade the teaching methods which can enhance the students' English language proficiency.

However, prior to developing various teaching techniques that might help to improve the command of the language, it is crucial to analyse the source of the problem which makes the students to face difficulties in using the English language that turns them to be unable to perform. It is not only the grammar of the language which is problematic to the students, but the limited vocabulary items in the inventory of mental lexicon of the learners too become the source of deficiencies to the students' performance or proficiency in the language. Hence, both form and meaning need emphasis in any language instruction (Ellis, 2006). The knowledge of L1 has often been seen as an advantage for an L2 learner to ease the process of learning the target structure when the similarities and differences of the target item and learners' L1 are pointed out to the learners (Tan, 2001; White, 1991). However, when the target items are not available or present in learners' L1, these learners might experience a tough learning period as they cannot resort to their L1 to seek for assistance.

One of the lexical categories in English language (learners' L2) which is not present in Bahasa Malaysia (learners' L1) is phrasal verbs. Languages which originate from the Germanic language family such as English, Dutch and German are classified as satellite-framed languages where the lexical phrase of verb (manner of motion) is followed by a particle that expresses the path of motion. On the other hand, the non-Germanic languages such as Japanese, Tamil, Malay (Polynesian), Korean and Turkish are categorised as verb-framed that do not have particle combination as the verb directly encode the path of motion (Cadierno, 2008 cited in Yasuda, 2010). For Malaysian learners, the absence of phrasal verbs in Bahasa Malaysia might make the learning of English phrasal verbs difficult.

The question on why a second language learner needs to learn the use of phrasal verbs when there is no such lexical category present in their first language, seems sensible. Bieber et al. (1999) cited in Waibel (2007) find the use of phrasal verbs is not only frequent in conversation, fiction and news but also academic writing. Although the presence of phrasal verbs denotes creativity in language expressions, it "does not necessarily make EFL or ESL learners' English more native-like but understanding and being able to use these constructions correctly in spoken and written English is essential if the learner is to develop a complete command of the language" (Sargeant, 1996:vii cited in Waibel, 2007:34). Phrasal verbs can often be substituted with a single verb equivalent but it is "often more specific in meaning than its equivalent and carries connotations which its potential users must be aware of" (Cornell, 1985: 275 cited in Waibel, 2007:37). Mohammad Khatib & Mino Ghannadi (2011) too opined that the insertion of phrasal verbs results in naturally well spoken English language and therefore, it is compulsory for an L2 learner to know its meaning to maximise its use in daily discourse. Despite its significance, previous studies have shown that the difficulty in understanding the use of phrasal verbs resulted in the learners' avoidance of the target item in sentence construction and communication by replacing them with a one word equivalent (Liao & Fukuya, 2002; Neagu, 2007). Thus, this study is looking forward to seeing the possibility of developing the students' use of English language especially

the lexical category of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles) by highlighting the use of these words through semantic-based instruction.

'Phrasal verbs' has been identified as one of the most challenging parts of the lexical categories to be mastered by EFL and ESL learners, especially for the speakers of first language (L1) from a non-Germanic language family which does not have the verb and particle combinations (Armstrong, 2004; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999 cited in Darwin & Gray, 1999; Mohammad Khatib & Mino Ghannadi, 2011; Neagu, 2007; Vieira, 2011; Yasoda, 2010). In spite of this, it is necessary to highlight that the use of phrasal verbs has also been identified as problematic to Dutch ESL learners from the Germanic language family although there is a similar construction in their L1 (Dagut & Laufer, 1985 cited in Darwin & Gray, 1999; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989 cited in Darwin & Gray, 1999).

Defining the feature of phrasal verbs, Bolinger (1971:xi) cited in Armstrong (2004) says it is "an explosion of lexical creativeness that surpasses anything else in our language". Thus, it is productive in nature as the combinations of verb and particle may vary at any time, depending on the context of its occurrence. Discussing on its function, according to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) there are three semantic categories of phrasal verbs namely literal (i.e. transparent), idiomatic (i.e. figurative or opaque) and aspectual (combination of transparent and opaque). Phrasal verbs with literal meaning are often easily distinguishable and analysable by individual units of its composition. However, idiomatic phrasal verbs are not easily analysable but the particle contributes to the meaning of the lexical phrase (Lindner, 1981 cited in Neagu, 2007; Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003). Therefore, a lucid understanding of how the meaning of verb and particle motivates the meaning of the phrasal verb in its entire occurrences is perhaps essential.

In Malaysian context, as far as the researcher is concerned, to date, there are few studies which have used a corpus based analysis to highlight the Malaysian students' inappropriate use of phrasal verbs and strategies they adopt in avoiding the use of phrasal verbs in their writings (Akbari, 2009; Rafidah Kamarudin, 2013; Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014). Corpus based studies carried out using the Malaysian learner corpus indicate that students tend to avoid using phrasal verbs in their writings and opt for single word equivalent than a multi-word expression (Akbari, 2009; Rafidah Kamarudin & Azmi Abdul Latiff, 2011). For Malaysian learners, the students' lack of lexical knowledge in L2, unawareness of the idiomatic expressions of phrasal verbs (Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014) as well as influence of learners' L1 to certain extent, have been reported as the reasons for the occurrence of inappropriate uses of phrasal verbs in their English writings (Rafidah Kamarudin & Azmi Abdul Latiff, 2011).

It was also identified that phrasal verb is one of the Multiword Units (MWUs) which is not tested regularly in examinations; hence it is not given much emphasis in reference materials and teaching and learning process in the classroom. Previous study on the use of phrasal verbs by Malaysian ESL learners reported that in Malaysian context, textbooks serve mandatory preferences in the classroom. Although the presence of phrasal verbs in textbooks is undeniable, the "various meanings", "different usages", or

“grammatical structures” are not presented. It is rather explicitly presented and discussed in the vocabulary and grammar sections whereas in reading texts and guided writing activities, its presentation is implicit (Rafidah Kamarudin, 2013:252). It was also recommended that a pedagogical approach which addresses the semantic confusion (differences in the meaning and usage of phrasal verbs) is implemented and tested on the learners to see its effectiveness (BronshTEYN & Tom, 2015; Rafidah Kamarudin, 2013). Likewise, Zarifi & Mukundan (2014) points out the role of material developers and teachers in providing materials and activities which may help learners to effectively use phrasal verbs especially the ones which carry idiomatic meanings.

Scouring for ways to resolve the problems in understanding the appropriate use of phrasal verbs, previous studies in cognitive linguistics have illustrated that each idiomatic expression is analysable to certain extent, through its individual word analysis which contributes to the figurative meaning as a whole (Boers, 2004 cited in Yasuda, 2010; Neagu, 2007; Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003).

Thus, this study intends to find out if the exposure to the core meanings of the individual items that make up a phrasal verb (i.e. verb and particle) enables the students to understand and produce this lexical phrase appropriately in their English writings.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The objective of this study is:

1.1.1 To investigate whether the teaching of English phrasal verbs through semantic-based instruction helps Malaysian ESL learners to be able to make appropriate use of phrasal verbs in English language writings.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

1.2.1 Is there any difference in relation to producing English phrasal verbs in writings between the experimental group (which received explicitly, the semantic-based instruction of the use of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles) and control group (which received traditional instruction)?

## **2. Phrasal Verbs Studies**

A phrasal verb can be defined both syntactically and semantically. Syntactically, it consists of a “verb (proper) and “a morphologically invariable particle” which function as a single grammatical unit (Quirk et al., 1985:1150). Semantically, according to Quirk et al. (1985:1152) “the meaning of the combination manifestly cannot be predicted from the meaning of the verb (proper) and particle in isolation” and thus, it functions as a single lexical unit too. Phrasal verb is a type of Multiword Expressions (MWEs) other than idioms, prefabrication and formulaic expressions. It is “compositional” when each word is individually analysable to compose the overall meaning of the lexical phrase or expression and “non-compositional” or rather “idiomatic” when it does not allow individual word analysis to compose the whole meaning (Cook & Stevenson, 2006:1)

It is difficult to understand the use of phrasal verbs as the learners do not realise the key concept where the meanings of phrasal verbs are defined

from the 'concrete' to the 'abstract' (Neagu, 2007). Traditional grammarians pointed out that the construction of meaning for phrasal verbs are merely unsystematic which means arbitrary and idiosyncratic (Bolinger, 1971 cited in Neagu, 2007; Fraser, 1976 cited in Neagu, 2007; Lipka, 1972 cited in Neagu, 2007). However, the cognitive grammarians found that the verbs and particles in phrasal verbs are compositional (i.e. analysable) to certain extent and they are systematic (Condon, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 cited in Yasuda, 2010; Lindner, 1981 cited in Neagu, 2007; Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003).

Likewise, Morimoto & Loewen (2007) identify that the use of image-schema based instruction although not significant in its overall contribution, results in better performance in the use of polysemous words (words which have more than one sense of meaning) in comparison to translation based instruction as the learners can mentally visualise the representation of the target items. The underlying principle in this study is the use of core meaning to understand various senses of meanings of the target item (i.e. 'break' and 'over'). This was successful in the use of preposition 'over' especially when the equivalent of the target item was present in the learners' L1 system. In a study conducted by Yasuda (2010), the use of orientational metaphor of particles was found helpful to facilitate the acquisition of novel phrasal verbs by Japanese English as foreign language (EFL) learners. The preceding study highlighted the use of explicit instruction to introduce the orientational metaphor to the learners in order to comprehend and produce novel phrasal verbs.

Generally, most previous studies denoted the use of Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) notion of conceptual metaphor which conceptualises the cognitive process as fundamentally metaphorical in nature. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980) cited in Yasuda (2010) the construal of an entity by any human being is affected by experience and environment. The interpretation or construal of the meaning of particles through conceptual metaphor seems highly technical and schematic as it involves an in-depth cognitive process. For instance, BODY/MOUTH, BUILDING, PROBLEM, BLANK and ACTIVITY are perceived as CONTAINER in which the meanings of the particles 'IN' and 'OUT' are motivated. On the other hand, INCREASING, POWER, HAPPY and COMPLETION are used to describe the orientational (i.e. spatial) and metaphorical (i.e. non-spatial) meanings of the particle 'UP' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 cited in Yasuda, 2010).

In Condon's (2008) study, the results indicate that the Cognitive Linguistics (CL) motivations for literal meanings of particles yielded significantly better performance compared to the more abstract CL motivations. It was suggested that "a link between the more abstract uses and the more literal uses of a particle" need to be highlighted to make the use of the particles more obvious (Condon, 2008: 152). A more precise explanation using the CL concept is deemed necessary especially to enable learners to differentiate between "the seemingly opposing meanings of *go out* and *come out* in sentences such as *the lights went out* and *the sun came out* (Condon, 2008: 152). Despite carrying the same particles, the words 'go' and 'come' too own significant semantic properties which also need explanation. As perceptions may vary from one individual to another, the notion of these

conceptual metaphors may not be applied utterly by all users of the language. The need for a vivid interpretation of the meaning of both verbs and particles based on its real context occurrences is definitely crucial.

Therefore, this study intends to propose the learning of meaning of a lexical item through the context of its occurrence rather than in isolation following the Columbia School theory which views language in Saussurean sense as a *system* rather than a rule-governed behaviour based on the sign-oriented approach. As both form and function are inseparable entities in learning a language, in this study, the Saussurean view of language is adopted and applied to the ESL learners to see its effectiveness in developing the learners' use of language. In the Saussurean sense, each lexical item is a sign that carries a vague or abstract meaning (i.e. invariant meaning) which differs from one another and at the same time, reciprocates with the message which is being communicated (Tobin, 1990).

Tobin (1990:51) describes meaning and message as two different entities where "the same linguistic sign with a single invariant meaning can be inferred to have many and diverse messages as well as multiple syntactic and pragmatic functions within different discourse contexts." This means, the invariant meaning is universal and this single meaning should be applicable in various contexts of its use. A linguistic sign, according to Tobin (1994) does not only mean a single word as a signal, but it involves a wide interpretation where phonemes, compound words, grammatical signals such as 'zero' (-Ø) for singular entity and '-s' for plural entity, word order, formulaic expressions or idioms and an entire text are also included in the list.

Theoretically, Tobin (1994) points out a vivid example by postulating the invariant meaning for the lexical item 'drive' as 'LED/TRANSPORT X or CAUSED X TO MOVE'. This invariant meaning is applicable in all context of occurrences of the signal 'drive', from 'nominal' to even 'phrasal verbs' composed of 'drive + prepositions' (Tobin, 1994:15). For instance, for the expression 'to *drive in* a nail', according to Tobin (1994:15), one could postulate the invariant meaning 'LIMITED BY BOUNDARIES' for the preposition 'in' where this meaning is also universally exploited in different linguistic and situational contexts.

Perhaps in the case of phrasal verbs, the identification of the single invariant meaning for these lexical items would be able to reveal the differences of the verb and particle combinations as suggested by Saussure, each word in a language is a sign which conveys a vague or abstract meaning. As far as the researcher is concerned, there are not many studies (if there is any) which have highlighted the invariant meaning of the phrasal verbs in English. Hence, in this study, the researcher takes a stance to figure out these meanings in order to expose them in the process of teaching and learning in the classroom to make the learning of this lexical category which is regarded as one of the most confusing elements in English, much easier.

### **3. The Invariant Meaning Findings**

The invariant meanings of the English phrasal verbs were postulated based on the analyses of individual signs (i.e., verbs and particles) which

form the phrasal verbs. The analyses below illustrate that the sign ‘put’ despite its various syntactic and pragmatic functions, signifies a single invariant meaning, which is ‘X PLACES Y (CONDITION)’. For the sign ‘put’ in [1], ‘**put** the first part of the scheme’ signifies that the object of the sentence which is ‘the first part of the scheme’ ‘is being placed in a condition where action will be taken to execute it’. Likewise, in [2], ‘**put** my paints and brushes’ the same sign explicates the objects (i.e., paints and brushes) which ‘are being placed on another object (i.e., a high stool) which serves as the condition’.

**PUT : X PLACES Y (CONDITION)**

1. On the following evening, her plan laid, Joan again found an excuse to retire early and **put** the first part of the scheme into action.  
[THE FIRST PART OF THE SCHEME IS PLACED INTO AN ACTION (CONDITION)]
2. I waited three days for the sun to come out but to no avail, so on a very grey, cloudy day I set my easel by the French doors, **put** my paints and brushes on a high stool next to me and started.  
[PAINTS AND BRUSHES ARE PLACED ON A HIGH STOOL (CONDITION)]  
[THEIR ROUTINE SUCH AS WORK / MEETING MALFUNCTIONS]

Discussing on the sign ‘off’, the invariant or core meaning of this particle is postulated as ‘X IS AWAY FROM Y’ where the conceptual metaphor ‘STOPPING’ and ‘DEPARTURE’ is embedded in the messages conveyed by each sentence below. In [1], *the backlit facility which is switched off* signifies the condition where ‘the facility is away from the normal condition of use’, which means ‘stopped’ in certain circumstances. Likewise, ‘off’ in [2] conceptualises the sign as in the sense of ‘departure’ when ‘someone is away from their place of origin / residence’.

**OFF : X IS AWAY FROM Y**

1. The backlit facility can be switched on and **off**.  
[THE BACKLIT FACILITY IS AWAY FROM USE - STOPPING]
2. A couple of years older than dad, she had lived in London for three decades, on and **off**. Mostly, she was **off**, travelling the world with Mr Gibbon, her constant companion for twenty-nine of those thirty years.  
[MOSTLY, SHE IS AWAY FROM LONDON - DEPARTURE]

**Table 1: The invariant meaning of verbs and particles that make up phrasal verbs**

No.	Verbs	Core meaning	Particles	Core meaning
1	Go	X (STARTING POINT) MOVES TO Y (END POINT)	Out	X ESCAPES THE BOUNDARIES OF Y
2	Get	X ACHIEVES /	Off	X IS AWAY FROM Y



		ACCOMPLISHES / ATTAINS Y		
3	Set	X DETERMINES Y (WITH A FORCE)	Down	X DESCENDS TO Y / X SUBMERGES
4	Put	X PLACES Y (CONDITION)	Up	Y ASCENDS TO X / Y EMERGES
5	Break	X CAUSES Y TO MALFUNCTION		
6	Take	X POSSESSES / RAISES Y		
7	Turn	X APPEARS AS Y		
8	Come	X REACHES Y		
9	Look	X INTERPRETES THE ATTRIBUTES OF Y		
10	Bring	X MOVES TO Y (WITH A FORCE)		

The language sample analyses below show how the invariant meaning of individual verbs and particles motivate the distribution of messages when forming phrasal verbs. The analysis revealed that the invariant meanings of 'put' which is 'X PLACES Y (CONDITION)' and 'off' which is 'X IS AWAY FROM Y' are applicable to show the distribution of messages of the phrasal verb 'put off'. In [A], '**put off** at Smithfield' is inferred as 'the person is placed in a condition – X PLACES Y (CONDITION)' to 'move away from the initial plan to go somewhere' – X IS AWAY FROM Y (STOPPING)'.

**[A] PUT OFF                      PUT : X PLACES Y (CONDITION)**

**OFF : X IS AWAY FROM Y**

I was **put off** at Smithfield and asked to get to the Strand as best I could for another bus. (T)  
(THE PERSON IS PLACED IN A CONDITION TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE INITIAL PLAN TO GO SOMEWHERE / TO CONTINUE JOURNEY - STOPPING)

**[B] PUT OUT                      PUT : X PLACES Y (CONDITION)**

**OUT : X ESCAPES THE BOUNDARIES OF Y**

Please stay in your seats and **put out** your cigarettes. (T)  
(THE CIGARETTES ARE PLACED IN A CONDITION WHERE IT ESCAPES THE BOUNDARIES OF FLAME)

The same sign, which is 'put', does not lose its point of departure despite being paired with another particle. The single invariant meaning of 'put' when combined with the invariant meaning of the particle 'out' (X ESCAPES THE BOUNDARIES OF Y), the combination revealed that '**put out** your cigarettes' can be inferred as 'an object (i.e., the cigarette) which is placed in a condition – X PLACES Y (CONDITION)' where it 'escapes the

boundaries of flame – X ESCAPES THE BOUNDARIES OF Y'. The analysis of authentic language samples revealed that invariant meaning of each sign that makes up the phrasal verbs 'put off' and 'put out' motivates the distribution of messages of these phrasal verbs in any context of its occurrence.

#### **4. Method and Participants**

The data were collected through a quasi-experimental design. Due to the constraints of creating an artificial group for the purpose of the experiment as the researcher lacks control over the participants (students) enrolled, the researcher used intact groups as the experimental group and control group. Hence, the samples for the experimental group and control group were chosen from the two classes taught by the researcher in a normal classroom setting. The samples were semester 1 students of Politeknik Sultan Idris Shah, Sabak Bernam, Selangor who were pursuing Diploma in Secretarial Science when the data was collected. The experimental group which comprised fifteen students was taught by the researcher with the semantic-based instruction of the use of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles). The invariant meanings established based on language samples extracted from the the English Concordancers (i.e. BNC – British National Corpus) were applied as treatment for the experimental group. At the same time, another group of fifteen students which was assigned as the control group was engaged into traditional instruction by providing the meanings of the phrasal verbs extracted from the Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary. The selection of phrasal verbs for the analysis was based on the list of frequently occurring phrasal verbs identified by Gardner & Davies (2007) through BNC. However, for the purpose of this study, the researcher limited the item of analysis to 20 phrasal verbs. The 20 phrasal verbs chosen as the item of analysis are; *get out, go out, set out, put out, break out, get off, go off, set off, put off, take off, turn down, break down, come down, look down, bring down, turn up, take up, look up, come up and bring up*.

#### **5. Research Instruments**

##### **5.1 Pre-tests and Post-tests**

The instruments used were pre-test and post-test which were administered to both groups before and after the treatment. There were two sets of pre-tests and post-tests carried out. The students were tested on both, taught and untaught (novel) phrasal verb items. For the taught items, in both pre-test and post-test, the students were asked to write an argumentative essay in English for about 350 words by including all the 20 phrasal verb items listed, in their essays. The pre-test was given to determine the subjects' prior knowledge in their English writings in relation to producing phrasal verbs. Moving on to the post-test, the aim of the test was to find out if there would be any development in the students' use of phrasal verbs in their English writings through a total of 4 hours of treatment. The time limit in order to complete their writings was an hour and 30 minutes. Simultaneously, these students were also tested on novel phrasal verb items, which means, phrasal verbs of different combinations of

verbs and particles which were not taught, before and after treatment to see if the instruction yielded significant results. For this reason, the researcher gave an objective test during the pre-test and post-test session. The researcher opined that giving another essay for this reason would be a futile experience, therefore a mixed combination of verbs and particles was provided and students were asked to choose the most appropriate words to fill in the blanks. This was to see if the students were able to apply the meaning of verbs and particles which they had learned during the treatment session, for the novel phrasal verb items.

## **5.2 Treatment Implementation**

As it was mentioned earlier, the students in the experimental group were given semantic-based instruction (explicitly) of the use of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles), whereas the control group students were engaged into traditional instruction by providing the meanings of the phrasal verbs extracted from the Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary. The treatment session was carried out for two consecutive weeks (i.e., two hours per week). A week before and after the treatment, the pre-tests and post-tests were given to both groups respectively.

During the first week (of 2 hours), the phrasal verbs in the particle group of 'out' and 'off' were concentrated. The treatment session was initiated with a brainstorming session where the students were asked what a phrasal verb is. It was important for the researcher to know the students' understanding of phrasal verbs before the treatment commenced. The students in the experimental group were then given explicit instructions on the form of phrasal verbs (i.e., separable / inseparable, transitive / intransitive) (Fuchs et al., 2006). Then, the students were asked to underline all the phrasal verbs that can be found in an article (which was taken from the grammar book) provided to them.

All the 10 phrasal verbs in the 'out' and 'off' particle categories were written on the whiteboard and the students were asked if the individual meanings of these items were known. The students then were explained that each word in any language is called a linguistic sign and therefore each sign or signal carries a single invariant meaning which is an unchanged meaning in any circumstances of its use. The students were also given explicit instruction that the meanings of words that can be found in any dictionaries are called messages or different senses of the word in its different context of use. These senses are derived from the single invariant meaning of the sign.

Although most of the time, the particles (i.e., 'out' and 'off') reveal the meaning of the phrasal verbs, the researcher emphasised that the meaning of individual verbs in the phrasal verbs is equally important to be unveiled to enable the learners to understand and get across the messages of different senses. The invariant meaning of the individual verbs and particles which were obtained through the first phase of this study was taught explicitly to the students. The students were provided some authentic language samples extracted from the BNC Written Corpus – English Concordancers) to show how the invariant meaning (which comprises conceptual metaphor) contributes to the different messages in the sentences. As a form of practice, the students were given a short fill-in-

blank exercise which comprised the phrasal verbs taught. In addition, students were also asked to construct two sentences for each phrasal verb item learned to see their understanding.

The same method was repeated for the second week of treatment (of 2 hours) with phrasal verbs with another two categories of particles, i.e., 'down' and 'up'. For both weeks of treatment, the control group students were not given any explanation on the invariant meaning of verbs and particles but they were only taught explicitly the meanings of phrasal verbs obtained from the Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary.

### **5.3 Questionnaire**

Questionnaire was not included as one of the research instruments at the beginning of the study. However, along the process of data collection, students' use of phrasal verbs in essay writing for pre-test and post-test inspired the researcher to distribute a list of open-ended questions to explore further students' knowledge on phrasal verbs before and after the treatment. Hence, all fifteen students from the experimental group responded to this questionnaire.

### **6. Data Analysis**

For the language samples extracted from the BNC corpus, Tobin (1990)'s concept of invariant meaning and Lakoff & Johnson (1980)'s notion of Conceptual Metaphor were used to determine the core (invariant) meanings of verbs and particles. The students' English essays were rated by the researcher and another English language teacher for interrater reliability. The paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test were run to find out if there is any difference in relation to producing English phrasal verbs in writings between the experimental group (which received explicitly, the semantic-based instruction of the use of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles) and control group (which received traditional instruction). The same inferential analyses were applied to test the significance of scores obtained for the untaught (novel) phrasal verb items.

### **7. Findings and Discussion**

It was found that for the taught items, the students' scores have indicated significant improvement within the experimental group [i.e. paired samples t-test:  $t(14) = -7.4, p < .05$ ] between pre-test ( $M = 34.33, SD = 9.23$ ) and post-test ( $M = 61, SD = 15.38$ ) and in between the groups [i.e. independent samples t-test:  $t(28) = 3.67, p < .05$ ] between experimental group ( $M = 61, SD = 15.38$ ) and control group ( $M = 38.67, SD = 17.88$ ]. The control group too, marked improvement in the paired samples t-test [i.e.  $t(14) = -2.32, p < .05$ ] between pre-test ( $M = 29.33, SD = 15.68$ ) and post-test ( $M = 38.67, SD = 17.88$ ]. The inferential analyses through paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test indicate that although both groups performed significantly better in post-tests compared to pre-tests, the experimental group which received the semantic-based explicit (verbs and particles in phrasal verbs) instruction outperformed (significantly) the control group which received traditional instruction.

Despite the convincing results, for the untaught (novel) items, the students' performance did not illustrate any significant mean difference within the experimental group [i.e. paired samples t-test:  $t(14) = -1.14, p < .05$ ] between pre-test ( $M = 25.93, SD = 13.55$ ) and post-test ( $M = 28.89, SD = 14.43$ ) and control group (i.e. paired samples t-test:  $t(14) = -1.08, p < .05$ ] between pre-test ( $M = 26.3, SD = 14.62$ ) and post-test ( $M = 29.26, SD = 12.85$ )). There was also no significant mean difference found for the results of the independent samples t-test between the groups for the untaught items [i.e.  $t(28) = -.08, p < .05$ ] between experimental group ( $M = 28.89, SD = 14.43$ ) and control group ( $M = 29.26, SD = 12.85$ )).

The independent samples t-test for the taught items pre-test and untaught items pre-test showed no significant mean difference between the groups [i.e. taught items:  $t(28) = 1.06, p < .05$ ] between experimental group ( $M = 34.33, SD = 9.23$ ) and control group ( $M = 29.33, SD = 15.68$ ); untaught items:  $t(28) = -.07, p < .05$ ] between experimental group ( $M = 25.93, SD = 13.55$ ) and control group ( $M = 26.3, SD = 14.62$ )). These results signify the homogeneity of samples' knowledge from both experimental and control groups. The tables below illustrate the findings from the paired samples t-test and independent samples t-test for the taught and untaught phrasal verb items:

**Table 2: Mean difference between the pre-test and post-test for taught items**

Group	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Paired samples t-test (Sig. < 0.05)
<b>Experimental</b> <b>N = 15</b>	<i>M</i> : 34.33 <i>SD</i> : 9.23	<i>M</i> : 61.00 <i>SD</i> : 15.38	0.000
<b>Control</b> <b>N = 15</b>	<i>M</i> : 29.33 <i>SD</i> : 15.68	<i>M</i> : 38.67 <i>SD</i> : 17.88	0.036
<b>Independent samples t-test (Sig. &lt; 0.05)</b>	0.296	0.001	-

**Table 3: Mean difference between the pre-test and post-test for untaught items**

Group	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Paired samples t-test (Sig. < 0.05)
<b>Experimental</b> <b>N = 15</b>	<i>M</i> : 25.93 <i>SD</i> : 13.55	<i>M</i> : 28.89 <i>SD</i> : 14.43	0.272
<b>Control</b> <b>N = 15</b>	<i>M</i> : 26.30 <i>SD</i> : 14.62	<i>M</i> : 29.26 <i>SD</i> : 12.85	0.300
<b>Independent samples t-test (Sig. &lt; 0.05)</b>	0.943	0.941	-

### 7.1 Students' Responses before and after Treatment

It seemed worthy for the researcher to learn from the students, their prior knowledge on phrasal verbs and the effectiveness of the treatment session. Students' responses indicated that most of them had no previous knowledge on phrasal verbs before the treatment session. Some responded

that they had some knowledge about phrasal verbs but lacked information on how to use it effectively in writing. These students too felt that the occurrence of phrasal verbs in their writings was limited. This is due to the reason that they were not sure of the meaning. Students were also asked the method(s) they often used to learn new words. Students' responses for this question varied ranging from notes provided by the teacher to learning through English movies and TV programmes as well as dictionaries and reference books.

On the other hand, these students responded positively towards phrasal verbs after the treatment session. All the students acknowledged the positive impact left by the treatment on them. They admitted that they knew phrasal verbs after the session and would always use it in writings hereafter more confidently. These students were also asked if the semantic-based instruction treatment had helped them to understand the use of phrasal verbs in writings. For this, they said the meaning of verbs and particles taught with some examples helped them very much. In addition to that, the handouts and exercises provided were also helpful. One of the students responded that there was no clue of what phrasal verb was until the treatment session where the meaning of verbs and particles were determined for better understanding of phrasal verbs use.

A comparison between before treatment and after treatment responses illustrates a better understanding of phrasal verbs by the students after the semantic-based explicit instructions of the use of phrasal verbs (i.e., verbs and particles).

## **8. Discussion**

The findings of this study have shown that the semantic-based explicit (verbs and particles in phrasal verbs) instruction is to certain extent effective in developing the students' use of phrasal verbs. This suggests that the explicit exposure to the invariant meaning (which comprises conceptual metaphor) of individual signs that makes up phrasal verbs helps learners to assimilate the meanings to interpret the messages conveyed by the phrasal verbs as a whole, in all contexts. The findings of this study are significant in its own way than that of certain previous studies (Condon, 2008; Yasuda, 2010). In Condon's (2008) study, the results show that the performance of the experimental group improved after the treatment session for the taught items compared to the control group especially in the delayed post-test which signifies that the explicit knowledge of CL motivations underlying phrasal verbs helps retention. In addition, the use of conceptual metaphor was also found fruitful especially for the learners to use the knowledge to make appropriate use of unexposed (novel) phrasal verb categories (Yasuda, 2010).

In contrary, although in this study the students in the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in the post-test which was held immediately one week after the treatment ended, there was no significant achievement traced in the performance of the experimental group for the untaught (novel) phrasal verb items. The unconvincing findings for the untaught (novel) phrasal verb items do not mean that the explicit exposure to the invariant meaning (which comprises conceptual

metaphor) of individual signs that makes up phrasal verbs (i.e. verbs and particles) does not facilitate learners' awareness of conceptual metaphors for the target items which are not stored in their mental lexicon. The results might have been affected by the type of test instrument given to the students in both groups. The use of objective test where the students were instructed to fill in the blanks (in sentences) with appropriate phrasal verbs perhaps was too rigid where the extensive use of these phrasal verbs could not be shown. The use of a productive test (i.e. a piece of writing) perhaps might have given more space for the students to show appropriate use.

Discussing on the most contributing factor which resulted in the success of the treatment for the taught phrasal verb items is perhaps the treatment method itself which adopted the invariant meaning concept which is blended with the Cognitive Linguistics approach within the ESL context which is different from an EFL context.

## **9. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

This study is perhaps the first to examine the effect of an explicit semantic-based instruction of verbs and particles on learning phrasal verbs in a Malaysian ESL context. Despite the success of Cognitive Grammar (CG) using the conceptual metaphor awareness to reveal the meaning of particles as one of the constituents in the formation of phrasal verbs, memorising or rather understanding the polysemous meanings which are extended from the schematic meanings is perhaps quite detrimental. In contrary, the Columbia School theory which strongly opposes the polysemous meanings, offers the postulation of "relatively abstract invariant meanings that account for all uses of their signs" (Dreer, 2007:31). It is the notion of Columbia School theory that "polysemy creates a communicative burden of remembering all the possible uses of a form and inferring the particular meaning exploited in each specific context" (Dreer, 2007:31). Hence, as a step of looking it forward, this study offered a rather novel approach by combining the Cognitive Linguistics motivations with the Columbia School theory to reveal that in order to make appropriate use of phrasal verbs, not only the particles, but the meaning of verbs should also be made explicit to enhance learning.

The analyses of the authentic language samples showed that the identification of single invariant meaning of the verbs and particles is important as they contribute to the realisation of different senses of phrasal verbs. Hence, it is recommended that this approach is adopted in the teaching and learning process of English phrasal verbs in the ESL classrooms. The ESL learners need to be exposed to the invariant meanings of each sign which constitute a phrasal verb (i.e., verb and particle). It is highly suggested that the ESL teachers play a vital role in analysing authentic language samples to see how these signs are being used in order to communicate messages in the speech community. The exposure to the different types of phrasal verbs, ranging from literal to non-literal (figurative) is deemed necessary to show how each sign motivates the distribution of messages of the English phrasal verbs. The postulation and understanding of the invariant meaning needs a learner's use of cognitive ability (i.e. mental imagery) on how they perceive information by relating it to the existential

knowledge. The results of this study support Saussurean (1983)'s claim that each linguistic item is a sign which carries a vague (unchanged) meaning which motivates the distribution of messages in every context of its occurrences (i.e. a sign is extended metaphorically from concrete 'spatial' messages to the more abstract realm of 'temporal' to the even more abstract realm of 'existential' message).

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