Avoidance of English Phrasal Verbs: Investigating the Effect of Proficiency, Learning Context, Task Type, and Verb Type

Tony P. BECKER
Colorado State University, USA

Previous L2 studies (Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Dagut & Laufer, 1985) have failed to consider the learning context and/or task type as possible explanations for avoidance of English phrasal verbs. This study overcomes these shortcomings in its investigation of phrasal verb usage by L2 learners of English and explores other potential causes for avoidance. A total of 52 L1 Chinese speakers of English participated in the study. Participants carried out three tasks over a one-hour period, which included multiple-choice, translation, and story-retell tasks. Each task targeted 10 literal and 10 figurative phrasal verbs that were selected from a corpus of spoken English based on comparable frequency. The findings suggest that factors such as learning context, task type, and phrasal verb type influence the extent to which learners avoid English phrasal verbs.

Introduction

Avoidance, which is conceptualized as the phenomenon of having passive knowledge of a certain second language (L2) structure, but opting not to use that structure where it would be contextually appropriate according to L1 norms (Kamimoto, Shimura, & Kellerman, 1992; Kleinmann, 1978; VanPatten & Benati, 2010), can be seen as a strategy exhibited by L2 learners when they need to resolve a linguistic problem (see Schachter, 1974). Not to be confused with ignorance, which refers to the failure to use a structure or word that is unknown to