

Investigating Malaysian Learners' Preference in the Use of One-Word Verbs vs Multi-Word Verbs

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Abstract

One option in English is to choose between one-word verbs (*'perform the experiment'*) and multi-word equivalents (*'carry out the experiment'*). Multi-word verbs are a characteristic of informal spoken discourse with a colloquial tone. According to previous studies, English language learners frequently struggle with and sometimes even avoid using this feature in spoken and written discourse. A total of 116 language learners in a Malaysian university undergoing various study programs and levels of study participated in the study. A test consisting of 45 MCQ items is adapted to explore Malaysian learners' preference in utilising multi-word vs. one-word verbs in casual spoken contexts. The study also intends to examine whether learners' gender and level of study affect the likelihood of employing multi-word verbs. It is hoped that the study's findings will inform language teachers and language material providers to consider including more multi-word units in teaching and learning.

Keywords: Multi-Word Verb, Single-Word Verb, Discourse, Phrasal Verbs, Language Learners

Introduction

Multi-word verbs

A multi-word verb is a language formation made up of two or more words (Alhatmi, 2023; Teng, 2020). Lew (2012), categorises common multi-word expressions in English, including noun compounds, phrasal verbs, and idioms. It also distinguishes between more fixed expressions and less fixed collocations, defined by their semantic and structural flexibility. McCarthy and O'Dell (2007) explain that multi-word verbs are made up of a verb and a particle (e.g. *pick up*, *carry out*) or a verb and two particles (e.g. *catch up with*, *come up with*). Biber et al. (1999) distinguished multi-word combinations into verb + prepositional particle (e.g. *go on*), verb + adverbial particle (e.g. *get up*), and verb + particle + preposition such as (e.g. *catch up with*).

Multi-word verbs can have unique and more complicated meanings than their constituent parts. Multi-word verbs have three meanings: transparent, semi-transparent, and non-transparent. The transparent meaning is easily grasped by combining the literal meanings of the different words, such as *'sit down'*. Semi-transparent meaning can be partially

comprehended by combining individual words but not totally, such as *'take off'* in the example "take off your jacket". Non-transparent meaning cannot be grasped merely by combining the dictionary definitions of the various verbs and particle(s) involved; for example, *'break down'* signifies 'to become unable to work correctly' rather than breaking into pieces.

Multi-Word Verbs and Language Learners

Although multi-word verbs are very common in English, they pose significant challenges for second language learners, and many of them struggle with multi-word verbs like *'put off'*, *'run into'* and *'come up with'* (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Hameed & Jassim, 2015; Minalla, 2024). These language features cause problems for language learners for a variety of reasons. The structure of multi-word verbs, which comprise two or more orthographic words that work together, makes them challenging to identify as a single semantic unit (Alhatmi, 2023; Teng, 2020; Minalla, 2024). The meanings of these verbs often cannot be deduced from their components. For instance, *'put off'* (*postpone*) is not a combination of the individual meanings of *'put'* and *'off'*. Unless students understand that a series of words creates a multi-word verb, they will likely try to unravel the meanings of the individual words (Lew, 2012). Thus, these verbs must be learnt, preserved, and recalled from memory (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007).

Language learners use a variety of ways to overcome communicative obstacles. One such approach is avoidance, which is having a passive understanding of a language structure commonly viewed as problematic. As a result of the complexity of multi-word verbs, learners choose single-word synonyms (Barekat & Baniasady, 2014). Language learners' fear of using multi-word verbs is connected with structural variations between L1 and L2 (Alwreikat & Yunus, 2022; Kleinman, 1977; Minalla, 2024). Liao and Fukuya (2004), identified three primary causes for probable avoidance: L1-L2 difference, L1-L2 idiomatic similarity, and inherent L2 complexity. Sung (2020) discovered that if students find a particular construction in the target language challenging to understand, such as discontinuous transitive phrasal verbs, they are more likely to avoid employing it.

A study by Karakuş (2017), noted that the semantic complexity of multi-word verbs leads to avoidance behaviour, with learners avoiding figurative phrasal verbs more than literal ones. Alshayban (2022), noticed that Arabic lacks multi-word verbs and differs structurally from English, whereas Thyab (2019), and Wasserstein and Lipka (2019), discovered that multi-word verbs impair the English language acquisition process for Arabic learners. Most EFL Arabic students in college have inadequate English ability; thus, mastering these multi-word verbs is more complex (Alghammas & Alhuwaydi, 2020). Similarly, Chen (2007), also found that Chinese college students have a greater tendency to employ single-word vocabulary rather than phrasal verbs.

However, it was reported that avoidance behaviour is negatively associated with English proficiency (Pazhakh, 2006). Aside from language proficiency, various factors can influence avoidance behaviours, including the learner's personality, the nature of the problem source, and the learning environment. Hence, this study investigates whether Malaysian English learners face similar problems - to refrain from using multi-word verbs and use the one-word verb counterparts. The study will also examine whether there is any relationship between learners' gender and their level of study with their preference for using single-word and multi-word verbs.

Methodology

Instrument

A set of 45 multiple-choice questions developed by Akbulut (2018) is adapted. The questions are formulated to get feedback from learners on their preference for using single-word or multi-word verbs. This test was distributed to learners, and responses were analysed quantitatively using SPSS version 29.

Respondents

A total of 116 respondents involved in the study, which comprised 32 male (27.6%) and 84 female (72.4%) students who come from various levels of study in a selected university in Malaysia (refer to Table 1). The respondents consist of students taking various programs in the university and at different levels of study (i.e. pre-diploma, diploma, and degree). A total of 11 students (9.4%) were in the Pre-Diploma, 84 students (71.8%) were in the Diploma, and 22 students (18.8%) were in the Degree level of study.

Table 1

Respondents Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	32	27.6	27.6	27.6
	female	84	72.4	72.4	100.0
	Total	116	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

Respondents Level of Study

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	pre-diploma	10	8.6	8.6	8.6
	diploma	84	72.4	72.4	72.4
	degree	22	19	19	100.0
	Total	116	100.0	100.0	

Findings and Discussions

Learners' Preference

Table 3 below shows results about the learners' preference for using multi-word verbs and single-word verbs.

Table 3

Learners' Preference

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	One-word	73	33.8	62.9	62.9
	Multi-word	43	19.9	37.1	100.0
	Total	116	53.7	100.0	

Results of the descriptive analysis indicated that most respondents preferred one-word verbs (62.9%) to multi-word verbs (37.1%). This finding is consistent with previous studies' findings that most language learners prefer single-word verbs and avoid multi-word verbs (Alshayban, 2022; Chen, 2007; Sung, 2020). One possible explanation for the avoidance of multi-word verbs is the absence of this linguistics structure in the learners' L1 (Malay). Despite the high preference for using one-word verbs, results show that a small percentage (37.1%) prefers this language form more than the one-word verb counterparts, indicating that Malaysian learners of English do not totally avoid multi-word verbs.

Gender and Preference

The following analysis investigates whether there is any relationship between learners' gender, level of study, and preference for single-word and multi-word verbs (Table 4).

Table 4

Relationship between learners' gender and preference

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.004 ^a	1	.953		
Continuity Correction ^b	.000	1	1.000		
Likelihood Ratio	.004	1	.953		
Fisher's Exact Test				1.000	.559
Linear-by-Linear Association	.003	1	.953		
N of Valid Cases	116				

Table 4 shows that there is no statistically significant association between gender and learners' preference for using single-word or multi-word verbs ($\chi^2=0.004$, $p\text{-value}=0.953 > 0.05$). This indicates that learners' gender does not affect learners' choice in using single-word or multi-word verbs. Results of Phi and Cramer's V also suggest that the strength of association between the variables is very weak (Table 5).

Table 5

Strength of association between learners' gender and preference

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-.006	.953
	Cramer's V	.006	.953
N of Valid Cases		116	

Level of Study and Preference

The following analysis focuses on the learners' level of study and their preference for using single-word and multi-word verbs.

Table 6

Learners' level of study and their preference

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.088 ^a	2	.048
Likelihood Ratio	6.649	2	.036
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.931	1	.015
N of Valid Cases	116		

Table 7

Strength of association between Learners' level of study and their preference

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.229	.048
	Cramer's V	.229	.048
N of Valid Cases		116	

Results of the Chi-Square tests (Table 6) above indicate that there is a statistically significant association between the level of study and learners' preference ($\chi^2=6.088$, $p\text{-value}=0.048 < 0.05$). This suggests learners' level of study does affect their preference for using one-word or multi-word verbs. Further analysis is then conducted to find out the strength of the association. Results of Phi and Cramer's V show a strong association between the learners' level of study and their preference for the use of multi-word or single-word verbs (Table 7). Following this, a post hoc test (Table 8) is conducted to determine whether the differences in learners' preferences are significant across the three different levels of study.

Table 8

Preference across the different levels of study

(I) level of study	(J) level of study	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pre-diploma	Diploma	-.257	.159	.244	-.64	.12
	Degree	-.445*	.182	.041	-.88	-.01
Diploma	Pre-diploma	.257	.159	.244	-.12	.64
	Degree	-.188	.114	.229	-.46	.08
Degree	Pre-diploma	.445*	.182	.041	.01	.88
	Diploma	.188	.114	.229	-.08	.46

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Results of the analysis indicate that there is a significant difference in terms of preference between students at the Pre-Diploma and Degree levels ($p\text{-value}=0.041 < 0.05$). However, there is no significant difference between learners at the Diploma and Degree level of study in their preferences. This indicates that those at the higher level of study (Degree) have greater preference in using multi-word rather than one-word verbs in comparison to those at the lower level (Pre-Diploma). This is perhaps not surprising as those at the higher level of study have been exposed to the second language (English) learning much longer than those at the lower level. Hence, they may have encountered a larger number of multi-word verbs throughout the learning process, contributing to a better understanding and use of the language form.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a clear preference among Malaysian English learners for one-word verbs over multi-word verbs. This tendency aligns with previous research indicating language learners' general avoidance of multi-word verbs. The absence of this linguistic structure in Malay, the learners' first language, likely contributes to this preference. Nonetheless, many participants preferred multi-word verbs, suggesting that these structures are not entirely unfamiliar or avoided.

Gender did not influence learners' preference for either verb type, indicating that this linguistic choice is not gender specific. However, a significant difference emerged in preference between learners at different levels of study. Higher-level students (Degree) were more inclined towards multi-word verbs than their lower-level counterparts (Pre-Diploma). This suggests that increased exposure to English through higher education facilitates a broader acquisition of linguistic features, including multi-word verbs.

These findings underscore the importance of incorporating multi-word verbs into English language teaching materials to enhance learners' linguistic competence. Future research could delve deeper into the cognitive processes involved in acquiring multi-word verbs, exploring the impact of explicit instruction on their use, and investigating the role of input frequency and complexity in learners' acquisition of these structures. Additionally, pedagogical practices could benefit from incorporating a more comprehensive range of multi-word verbs into teaching materials and activities, particularly for higher-level learners. By

providing ample exposure and opportunities for practice, educators can facilitate the development of accurate and fluent multi-word verb use among Malaysian English learners.

The research offers significant theoretical contributions to second language acquisition (SLA) and English language teaching (ELT), particularly in multi-word verb acquisition. By examining factors like learner preferences, gender, and level of study, the research sheds light on why L2 learners may avoid using multi-word verbs and how these factors influence their usage. These findings have practical implications for English language teaching, informing curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, assessment, and the creation of language learning materials. By focusing on multi-word verbs, the research provides valuable insights and recommendations to enhance language teaching and learning, ultimately contributing to the advancement of SLA and ELT.

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