

# Multi-Word Verbs vs. One-Word Verb Construction: Between Avoidance and Preference in EFL Learning Contexts

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## Abstract

Although English allows for both one-word and multi-word verbs, past research has shown that EFL students commonly struggle with, and even avoid, multi-word verbs. This study aims at examining the influence of utilizing contextualized authentic materials via reading activities on EFL intermediate learners' attitudes towards avoiding and preferring using MWV (multi-word verbs, also known as phrasal verbs (PV)) or one-word verbs. The study used both experimental and descriptive methods, and data was collected via pre- and post-tests. MWVs are introduced through reading activities to two learning groups: group A represents the experimental group, and group B acts as the control group. MWVs were introduced to the participants of group A via contextualized authentic materials (texts, pictures, and cartoons) and to group B through non-authentic contextualized reading texts. The analyzed data has shown that the attitudes of group A's participants improve towards using some MWVs' types on many occasions rather than utilizing their counterparts of one-word verbs. For example, they prefer using transparent and semi-transparent prepositional PVs as well as transparent adverbial PVs. On the other hand, the findings have shown that the participants avoid using non-transparent PVs regardless of their constructions (prepositional PVs, adverbial PVs, or phrasal prepositional verbs). In addition, they avoid using adverbial PVs of the semi-transparent PV's types. Hence, contextualized authentic material via reading activities is a more effective strategy for enhancing EFL learners' attitudes towards preferring using MWVs rather than their counterparts of one-word verbs, specifically the transparent prepositional and adverbial of PV's types.

**Keywords:** authentic, avoid, phrasal, prefer, reading, verbs

## 1. Introduction

The English language, in its richness and complexity, contains a wide range of verb formations, from single words like "train" to multi-word verbs like "work out," both of which serve communication purposes. It is widely acknowledged that MWVs pose a significant challenge for EFL learners to acquire (Alhatmi, 2023; Alangari et al., 2020). Anecdotal and empirical evidence indicate that many EFL learners prefer OWVs over MWVs because they believe OWVs are easier to understand, form, and use. This preference creates challenges that hinder fluency, expression, communicative competence, and overall language proficiency. Therefore, this research intends to investigate the interesting interplay between avoidance and preference for multi-word verbs (MWVs) and one-word verbs (OWVs) in EFL learning contexts. It mainly attempts to examine the impact of incorporating contextualized authentic materials via reading activities on EFL learners' attitudes towards avoiding or preferring using MWV over one-word verbs. Based on this objective, the study intends to answer these questions: Is contextualized authentic material an influential tool in EFL learners' attitudes towards preferring or avoiding MWV over OWV? and could it pique EFL learners' interest and motivate them to understand and use phrasal verbs?.

EFL learners confront numerous challenges in learning and using multi-word verbs. These difficulties could be attributed to cross-linguistic discrepancies between English and the learners' original languages, a lack of exposure to authentic input and output, insufficient knowledge of the form, meaning, and usage of MWVs, and negative attitudes or perceptions of MWVs. Consequently, the primary feature of these challenges is that EFL learners lack multi-word verb formations since they are unfamiliar with their original language because their mother tongues are not Germanic. EFL students whose L1s lack PVs are more likely to find it difficult to use English PVs and to avoid doing so. Furthermore, because of their context-specific semantic complexity, they have a distinct syntax (Alangari et al., 2020). As a result of these difficulties, EFL learners may tend to avoid or underuse multi-word verbs in their spoken and written production, which may affect their communicative competence and naturalness in English.

Enhancing EFL learners' ability to acquire multi-word verbs as an essential component of the English language demands providing authenticity and introducing contextualization into EFL learning contexts. It requires addressing MWVs from different angles, including their idiomatic nature, variety of meanings, and grammatical norms. Furthermore, the differences between EFL learners' first languages and English have a significant impact on their capacity to grasp and apply MWVs. Integrating the EFL classroom with authentic materials and activities fosters natural exposure to phrasal verbs in context. Since it creates a wonderful opportunity for the goal of communicative language in the classroom, the use of authentic materials demonstrates its usefulness.

MWVs are essential parts of the English language, and their consistency may be seen in a variety of settings and circumstances. They are a prevalent feature of written and even formal vernacular; they are also utilized in spoken and casual English. Moreover, MWV is a crucial component of language competency and should be prioritized in EFL learning environments. Learners cannot become proficient in a variety of languages without being aware of the use of PVs (Alwreikat & Yunus, 2022). Armstrong (2004) emphasizes that teaching English phrasal verbs is important for improving L2 learners' ability to produce and recognize these verb forms. Phrasal verbs are either underutilized or avoided by EFL learners for these and other reasons. Thus, this study holds significant value for both understanding appropriate learning contexts for MWVs and enhancing EFL pedagogy. By investigating the types of PVs that cause avoidance and uncovering learners' preferences, we can build effective techniques to bridge the gap between comprehension and confident use. This can enable EFL students to express themselves accurately and sophisticatedly by navigating the rich tapestry of English verbs.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 English Multi-Word Verbs

A multi-word verb is a multi-word language construction that is made up of two or more words (Alhatmi, 2023; Teng, 2020). Because of their structure, meaning, and usage, multi-word verbs can present some confusion and difficulty for EFL learners (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2007). According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2007), multi-word verbs are made of a verb and a particle (a preposition or adverb) or a verb and two particles (an adverb and a preposition). Biber et al. (1999) identified four main categories of multiword combinations, which are as follows: verb + prepositional particle (known as prepositional phrasal verbs), e.g., 'go on'; verb + adverbial particle (known as adverbial phrasal verbs), e.g., 'get up'; verb + particle + preposition (known as phrasal prepositional verbs), e.g., 'catch up with'. Multi-word verbs can indeed have a variety of meanings that can be different from, and more complex than, simply adding together the individual parts. In multi-word verbs, we found three different types of meanings: transparent, semi-transparent, and non-transparent. The transparent meaning can be easily understood by simply combining the meanings of its individual words, e.g., 'sit down', while the semi-transparent meaning refers to the meaning that can be partially understood by combining the individual words but not entirely, such as 'take off' in the example "take off your jacket". However, non-transparent meaning cannot be understood simply by combining the dictionary meanings of the individual verb and particle(s) involved; for example, "break down" means 'to become unable to work properly' (not literally breaking into pieces).

### 2.2 Multi-Word Verbs between Avoidance and Preference

Language learners turn to a variety of ways to get over communicative difficulties. One of these tactics is avoidance, which is characterized as having passive knowledge of a particular language structure that is usually seen as difficult. That results in learners preferring to avoid multi-word verbs due to their difficulty, opting instead for single-word synonyms (Barekat & Baniasady, 2014). Avoidance behavior of EFL learners for using phrasal verbs linked with structural differences between L1 and L2 (Alwreikat and Yunus, 2022; Kleinman, 1977). In this context, there are three main reasons given for possible avoidance: "(a) L1-L2 difference, (b) L1-L2 idiomatic similarity, and (c) inherent L2 complexity (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). Sung (2020) examined the fact that if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend such as discontinuous transitive PVs, it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it. Alshayban, (2022) noted that Arabic lacks multi-word verbs and differs structurally from English, and Thyab (2019) and Wasserstein & Lipka, (2019) stated that multi-word verbs complicate English language learning process for Arabic learners. Thus, the majority of EFL Arabic students attending college have poor English ability, which makes mastering these structures more difficult (Alghammas & Alhuwaydi, 2020). According to Pazhakh (2006), avoidance and English proficiency level are adversely correlated. In addition to a student's degree of language competence, a variety of other factors, including the learner's personality, the nature of the problem source, and the learning environment, might influence their avoidance behaviors. Chen (2007) noted that those Chinese college students appeared to use one-word vocabulary instead of phrasal verbs. On the other hand, for semantic reasons primarily, L2 English learners avoid using phrasal verbs. Learners of Dutch avoided using idiomatic phrasal verbs because they believed them to be too Dutch-like. (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989). According to Karakuş (2017), Turkish EFL learners prefer to use phrasal verbs in Turkish EFL situations since they seem more similar to one-word verbs. In addition, it was emphasized that the reason for avoidance behavior is the semantic complexity of phrasal verbs; learners avoided using figurative phrasal verbs more than literal ones.

### 2.3 Contextualized Authentic Material

Finding effective teaching and learning strategies for phrasal verbs becomes critical when considering their complexity and the tendency of second language learners to avoid using them. According to Mitchel (2018), context can help EFL learners learn phrasal verbs. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the observed gap in the literature on phrasal verbs by investigating empirically whether contextualized authentic reading materials helps EFL learners avoid utilizing phrasal verbs. The contextualizing learning process provides situations or settings in which people can use a language while keeping it relevant and exciting (Rohayati, 2013). Giving students a meaningful context helps them learn more efficiently because it allows them to focus on the meaning rather than the form of the words. On the other hand, Ciornei and Dina (2014) explain the authentic term as it has been used in opposition to the predefined patterns found in textbooks. Authentic texts are non-pedagogical texts that support learners in developing their communicative and cultural capabilities. Everything made for native speakers of a language that we may utilize for teaching is referred to as authentic materials, or realia (Ciornei & Dina, 2014; Minalla, 2023). With shifting language limits, authentic material is increasingly often defined as ideas, words, phrases, and expressions heard and read in real-life circumstances. Using authentic materials (such as instruction manuals, recipes, advertisements in newspapers, or even songs) will

motivate students to scan and analyze the meaning, form, and usage of phrasal verbs in real-life contexts (Regionales, 2018). Thus, authentic material attracts students to read material meant for native speakers, empowering them to read more confidently and widely outside of classroom contexts. Online materials generated directly from the target cultures of the languages we teach are virtually unlimited. These materials give our students useful cultural information together with "real-life" language input. Students learn about important topics using resources such as journals, newspapers, audio, magazines, books, videos, and internet sites.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed both experimental and descriptive approaches in the investigation; thus, to attain reliable findings, it used qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

#### 3.1 Sample

The sample of this study is intermediate undergraduates majoring in English who have just completed their second year in the department of English Language at Blue Nile University, Sudan. The participants' age range is between 19 and 24 years old. By employing the systematic sampling method, participants' English proficiency was used as a key factor in their selection. To attain homogeneity in EFL proficiency, 77 students took the Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT). As a result, the selection was strictly limited to learners at the intermediate level. Thus, 32 homogenous EFL intermediate learners were selected as participants and then divided into two groups. Group A has 16 participants representing the experimental group, and 16 participants in Group B represent the control group.

#### 3.2 Instrument

The data was gathered using pre- and post-tests, and to check participants' language proficiency and then measure homogeneity, the QOPT test was used. Based on the QOT's result, the final participants of the study are selected. Both pre- and post-tests are standard and authentic, which is related to John Flower's Phrasal Verbs Organizer book. The pre-test was given to all subjects in the EFL class's first session. The post-test was administered to assess the student's performance after the implementation of treatment. Both pre- and post-tests were administered to three questions: fill-in-the-blank of reading passages, multi-choice questions, and complete sentences using prompts such as pictures and animated films of cartoons. In addition, both tests offer any phrasal verb and its equivalent one-word verb as options offered to the participants. The participants are free to choose what they think is appropriate for completing the gaps. As a result, the options included the multi-word verb that was anticipated, its counterpart in one word, and the multi-word verb that was distractor and its equivalent in one word. All questions and their answers in the post-test depend on authentic reading texts that they have already learned and practiced. The test's reliability was assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which came out as (.766). This outcome demonstrated that the test's reliability is statistically acceptable.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

The participants in group A were introduced to contextualized authentic materials in three forms, namely texts, pictures, and cartoons, via reading activities that mainly focused on the usage of phrasal verbs in different contexts of transparent and semi-transparent PV's types. Several topics were chosen sport, leisure, food, money matters, songs, and health. For each of these topics, appropriate contextualized authentic materials—articles from interviews, newspapers, advertisements, magazines, documentaries, movies, shows, and broadcasts—are used in the classroom. For better students' performance, a questionnaire made of six open-ended questions is individually applied to find out the most useful types of contextualized authentic materials that can be used. Based on the questionnaire's results, the most frequent types of contextualized authentic materials are selected. While the participants in group B depend on non-authentic reading materials for learning phrasal verbs that are also presented via reading activities, each group's participants had 60 minutes of class per day for six weeks.

For better opportunities for learners' interaction, the study follows the main reading lesson's stages that the BBC-British Council (2011) recommended. There are six stages for a reading lesson; however, for the purposes of this study, only four stages are applied, as follows: lead-in, reading for gist, reading for specific information, and post-text discussion. The lead-in is to stimulate students' prior knowledge of the subject and pique their interest in the lesson's topic. The second stage (reading for the gist) is intended to encourage students to read for the gist and to gain an overview of the content. The third stage is used to help students better understand the text by identifying places, facts, people, figures, times, etc. The fourth stage is post-text discussion, which is typically a speaking (or writing) activity that allows students to respond to the text in a personal manner while also broadening the context of the text. In the fourth stage, students are required to practice phrasal verbs through different activities that provide the participants with an opportunity to personalize the topic. These reading activities, though at different stages, are delivered with much more focus on student-centered reading strategies. The reading activities are offered at these different stages using the student-centered reading technique.

### 4. Data Analysis

The collected data was primarily used to determine if the treatment (using contextualized authentic materials via reading activities) influenced the experimental group's participants' attitudes toward avoiding or preferring the use of multi-word verb constructions. With reference to Table 1, the analysis of the pre-test showed that the experimental group's ( $M = 37.59$ ,  $SD = 8.926$ ) and control group's ( $M = 37.65$ ,  $SD = 8.358$ ) scores did not significantly differ from one another, according to the results ( $t = .810$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Since there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between Group A (the experimental group) and Group B (the control group) on the pre-tests, the significance ( $P$ ) was greater than 0.05. On the other hand, analyzing the post-test data demonstrated that Group A and Group B's mean scores on the post-tests differed considerably. The results for the control group ( $M = 83.15$ ,  $SD = 8.106$ ) and experimental group

(M = 38.09, SD = 6.482), t = 0.04, p<.05. There were significant differences, as shown by the significance level (P) being less than 0.05. This significant difference benefits participants in group A, who learn phrasal verbs through contextualized role-play activities in reading and listening courses. Thus, integrating contextualized role-play activities into learning phrasal verbs improved learners' attitudes toward preferring the use of phrasal verbs over their counterpart one-word verbs.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-test's Analysis

Group	Test	Average	Median	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2- tailed)
Group A	Pre-	37.593	35.5	8.926	-233	.810
	Post-	83.156	85.5	6.482	.003	.04
Group B	Pre-	37.656	35.5	8.358	-242	.810
	Post-	38.093	37	8.106	.003	.04

4.1 Post-test's Analysis

The post-test allowed us to determine if the contextualized authentic materials via reading activities have an influence on participants' attitudes about whether they prefer the use of phrasal verbs or their counterparts of one-word verbs instead. It contains two types of tasks; in both tasks, the participants are free to fill in the gaps with appropriate phrasal verbs or their counterparts of one-word verbs.

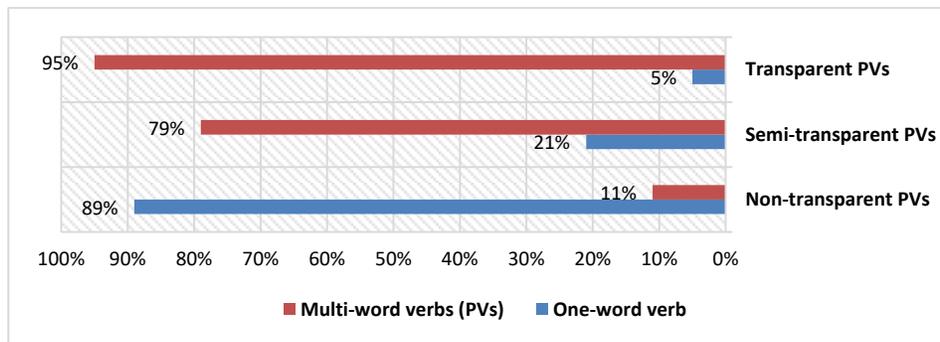


Figure 1. Prepositional Phrasal Verbs

The obtained result, displayed in the above figure (1), showed that there is a remarkable difference between the use of multi-word verbs (PVs) and one-word verbs when the focus is on prepositional PVs. The prepositions are the ones that usually connect with the verbs of everyday actions, such as in, on, at, for, with, to, and from. Most of the participants, 95%, prefer using transparent PVs that are made up of a verb followed by a preposition. The indication was very strong towards the use of prepositional PVs with the types of transparent 95% and semi-transparent 79%. However, most participants show no interest in using prepositional PVs of type non-transparent (idiomatic), as only 11% of the students deal with non-transparent phrasal verbs. It means that the participants show a preference for the use of multi-word verbs over one-word verbs with prepositional PVs, particularly the transparent and semi-transparent types. However, they prefer to use one-word verbs with the non-transparent types.

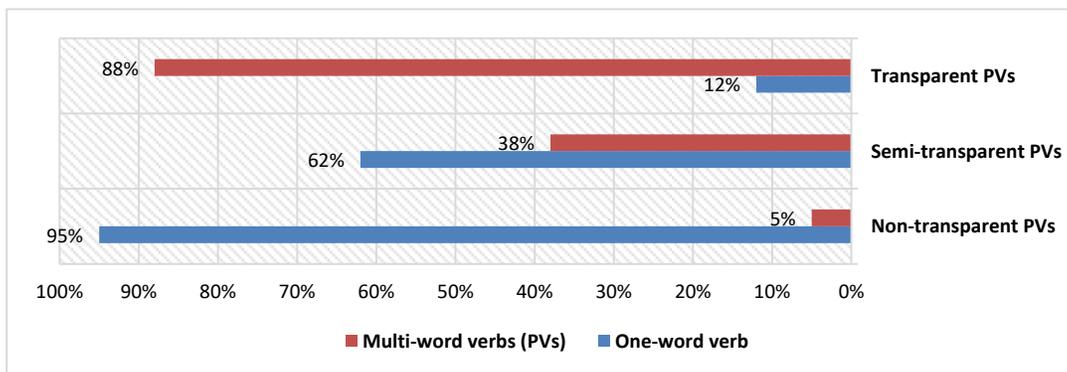


Figure 2. Adverbial Phrasal Verbs

The results in Figure 2 show that the participants have varying attitudes toward the three types of PVs when focusing on adverbial PVs. The adverbial PVs are made up of verbs, most of which are followed by the adverbs up, down, out, off, and across. Also, the majority of participants (88%) prefer to use adverbial PVs of transparent type over one-word verbs. While most of the participants, 95%, prefer to use PVs' counterpart of one-word for non-transparent type. Also, most participants prefer using one-word verbs instead of PVs in the transparent type. It is obvious the participants in the two phrasal verb types (semi-transparent and non-transparent) prefer to use PVs' counterparts of one-word verbs than multi-word verbs. It means that the participants avoid using adverbial PVs with semi-transparent and non-transparent

types, while they prefer using them with transparent types. It indicates that the participants find no difficulty with the adverbial PVs of transparent types, but they find difficulty with the other two PVs' types, namely, semi-transparent and non-transparent.

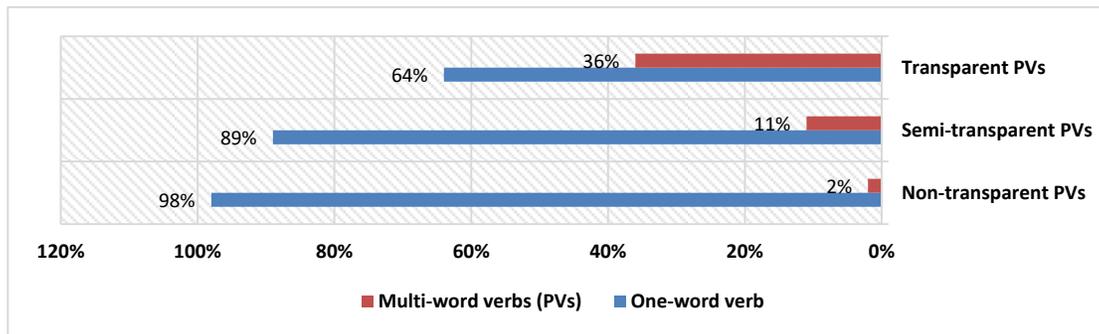


Figure 3. Phrasal Prepositional Verbs

As we can see in figure (3), the PVs contain two particles that follow the verb, which are a preposition and an adverb. The obtained result showed that the participants' performance in all PV types indicated that PVs with two particles (preposition and adverb) were avoided, and the participants preferred to use a one-word verb instead. The result showed that a vast majority of participants, 98%, use one-word verbs instead of PVs with type non-transparent; 89% of participants use one-word verbs instead of PVs with type non-transparent; and 68% of participants use one-word verbs instead of PVs with type non-transparent. Then, with the PVs that are made up of verbs followed by a preposition and adverb, regardless of the PVs' types, the participants find difficulty using them and prefer using one-word verbs instead. However, to some extent, with the transparent type, 36 of the participants succeed in dealing with the prepositional adverbial PVs.

**5. Discussion**

Utilizing contextualized authentic materials succeeded in leading participants to prefer using multi-word verbs rather than one-word verbs with two types of PVs. However, these contextualized authentic materials were not effective in changing learners' attitudes toward avoiding using other two types of PVs and preferring to use one-word verbs instead. Zohaib (2019) showed that EFL students have a positive perception of using phrasal verbs in their writing, while Minalla (2017) found that EFL students place a lot of emphasis on using single-word verbs over multi-word verbs (PVs). Thus, the results of this study reveal two main findings, considering that each PV and its equivalent one-word verb were offered as options from which participants were free to choose. The first finding was that the participants prefer using PVs rather than one-word verbs for the PV's types: transparent prepositional and adverbial PVs and semi-transparent prepositional PV. In other words, contextual authentic material has a positive impact on preferring transparent and semi-transparent PVs over single-word verbs. This result is in line with the findings of Liang (2022), who found that contextual cues play an important role in decoding English phrasal verbs in the reading tasks, and Alhatmi's findings (2023) showed that the learner can understand the meaning of the PVs that are used in context. Similarly, the study conducted by Algethami and Almalki (2016) has shown that EFL Saudi learners use multi-word verbs, specifically the transparent PVs' type. The learners' use of transparent PVs is attributed to the fact that the meaning of transparent PVs can be predicted from the meanings of the words that make them up (Algethami & Almalki, 2016). In other words, the lack of avoidance of literal phrasal verbs by the EFL learners' groups. Thus, contextualizing real-world topics offers a rich and effective way to make the use of multi-word verbs have priority over one-word verbs.

The second finding has shown that the participants avoid using phrasal verbs and prefer using one-word verbs instead when the equivalent options of the PV of these types are semi-transparent adverbial PVs, non-transparent prepositional PVs, adverbial PVs, and phrasal prepositional verbs. In other words, EFL learners avoid utilising non-transparent and semi-transparent adverbial PVs and instead use single-word verbs, despite the contextualised authentic information they were presented with. The avoidance of non-transparent PVs is attributed to the difficulty of structural differences between the learners' L1 and L2 regarding phrasal verbs (Algethami & Almalki, 2016; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). This result is like the one that revealed that EFL students avoid using multi-word verbs, as conducted by Al-Otaibi (2018) and Gandorah. Moreover, it is in line with the findings of previous studies that examined the use of phrasal verbs by Saudi EFL learners (Algethami & Almalki, 2016; Al-Otaibi, 2018); Iranian EFL learners (Barekat and Baniasady, 2014); Turkish EFL learners (Akbulut, 2018); Arabic English language learners (Al-Otaibi, 2018); and Chinese EFL and ESL learners (Becker, 2014).

**6. Conclusion**

Investigating EFL learners' attitudes towards using phrasal verbs is varied between avoidance and preference according to the contexts in which they are used and factors that concern their meanings and structures. This study aims to examine the influence of utilizing contextualized authentic materials via reading activities on EFL learners' attitudes toward avoiding and preferring using multi-word verb constructions or one-word verbs. It has been shown that utilizing contextual authentic material via reading activities is an effective technique for practicing multi-word verbs in EFL learning contexts, as the participants prefer using multi-word verbs over their counterparts, one-word verbs in most cases. For example, the participants prefer using prepositional PVs of transparent and semi-transparent types over one-word verbs due to their presence in contextualized authentic situations. On the other hand, it found that participants avoid using non-transparent

PVs with all PVs' constructions, such as prepositional, adverbial, and prepositional adverbial PVs. In addition, they avoid using adverbial PVs of the semi-transparent type. Based on these above findings, it recommends utilizing contextualized authentic material via reading activities as an effective strategy for teaching EFL learners phrasal verbs, in particular the types of prepositional PVs and adverbial PVs. It suggests that further research can be conducted on other areas such as writing, speaking, listening, and so forth.

### **7. Limitations and Implications**

The investigation was limited to only one skill, which is reading; further research can be done on other skills such as writing, listening, and speaking. In addition, the study's treatment covered a limited number of PVs and their equivalent one-word verbs, and it was applied to a small number of participants.

One of the most significant implications is that the acquisition of phrasal verbs is a neglected area in EFL learners' context that influences EFL learners' language proficiency. It also concludes that mastery of phrasal verbs can be achieved by depending only on the learning material in the students' textbook.

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### **Authors contributions**

Dr. Amir Abdalla Minalla was responsible for study design and revising. He was responsible for data collection and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Alameen Ahmed revised it. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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