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

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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

a learner (Kleinmann, 1977; Seliger, 1989), avoidance signifies that an L2 learner has passive knowledge of a particular structure (i.e., an ability to recognize its form and/or meaning), but underproduces that structure with respect to his or her active knowledge, i.e., the learner avoids recalling or producing the problematic structure (for a discussion of passive and active knowledge, see Laufer & Goldstein, 2004).

Many L2 learners strategically avoid the use of certain structures, particularly if those structures in the target language are difficult to produce across various language contexts. For example, an L2 learner might avoid the use of a particular phrasal verb (e.g., *find out*) in a casual conversation by opting for an alternative verb (e.g., *discover*) instead, even though the phrasal verb would be contextually appropriate and likely more common in naturally occurring, informal speech. In such a situation, L2 learners must choose to either use or avoid the phrasal verb, knowing that the phrasal verb and its one-word near-equivalent are both plausible options. This decision largely depends on the perceived difficulty of the phrasal verb, which oftentimes results in underproduction or complete non-use, even when both options are equally appropriate. This suggests that avoidance is a common characteristic of the L2 learning process.

The origins of avoidance research can be found in Schachter's (1974) well-known study, which compared errors in relative clauses among L2 writers of English. Her study brought to light the notion that some learners appear to avoid producing particular L2 structures that are perceived to be difficult. Thus, it was concluded that avoidance is an L2 learning strategy whereby individuals resolve a linguistic problem by opting not to produce a challenging L2 structure. Since that earlier study, significant contributions to the conceptualization of avoidance have been made by various researchers. For instance, Kleinmann (1977, 1978) expanded upon Schachter's notion of avoidance by suggesting that in order to claim that an individual is avoiding a particular L2 structure, there must be evidence that learners actually have knowledge of the structure in question; otherwise, the non-use of the structure might be attributed to ignorance (see Seliger, 1989), not avoidance. In addition, Kamimoto, Shimura, and Kellerman (1992) concluded that clear procedures must be laid out to determine how the target language structure occurs in the L1 (in terms of form, distribution, and function), as well as to determine the extent to which the target language structure exists in the L2 knowledge base of an individual or a group of

individuals. Overall, the findings from these early studies highlighted the notion that avoidance in L2 learning is a complex phenomenon and involves various facets that must be investigated further.

More recent research on avoidance has focused on identifying potential factors that prompt L2 learners to avoid certain structures. The majority of this research has indicated that a multitude of factors can influence avoidance, including L1-L2 differences (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989), L2 proficiency (Liao & Fukuya, 2004), learner age (Vázquez, 2005), and task type (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). The specific influences of these different factors on avoidance are still not well understood. This is largely because L2 avoidance studies have used a variety of methodologies and have focused on different L2 structures, such as relative clauses (e.g., Jin & Qiao, 2010) and negation (e.g., Han, 1998; Vázquez, 2005), making comparisons between studies difficult.

While comparisons across avoidance studies have been somewhat difficult, research on the avoidance of L2 phrasal verbs has been one area that has allowed for possible comparisons. Throughout the past 20 years, what little research that has been produced on L2 avoidance has primarily focused on the use of phrasal verbs (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). The study of phrasal verbs has more recently received greater attention, since phrasal verbs are commonly used by native speakers of a given language, but are often seen as problematic for L2 learners, largely because of their lack of transparency and the random nature of the particles (Condon, 2008; Gries, 2001). The present study focuses on the avoidance of phrasal verbs by L2 learners of English.

Semantic Uniqueness of Phrasal Verbs

Native English speakers' use of phrasal verbs often causes L2 learners of English to misinterpret messages and to avoid using the constructions by opting for single-word verbs instead, even though many of these constructions might be quite similar in their native language (Darwin & Gray, 1999). One reason for the difficulty in mastering the use of phrasal verbs can be explained by the fact that phrasal verbs can belong to different semantic categories, which are not always apparent to L2 learners. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) have categorized phrasal verbs in terms of their semantic categories: literal, figurative

(idiomatic), and aspectual types. Literal phrasal verbs have meanings that are relatively straightforward products of their semantic components. In other words, the meanings of the phrasal verbs are easily deducible just by looking at the individual constituents. Example (1) illustrates this point:

(1) I'm going to *take away* your allowance.

The second category refers to those phrasal verbs that are figurative, or idiomatic. Figurative phrasal verbs have meanings that are the result of a metaphorical shift in the relationship of the individual components (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). The meanings of these phrasal verbs cannot be ascertained by simply looking at the constituent parts, but together they result in new figurative meanings instead. An example of a figurative phrasal verb is found below.

(2) I'm sorry dear, I don't know if the dog will *turn up*.

Other examples of figurative phrasal verbs include *let down* and *make up*. In these verbs, the meanings of the individual parts are lost, making this type of phrasal verb so difficult to grasp. According to Laufer and Eliasson (1993), these phrasal verbs are "semantically opaque" (p. 37), and are considered semantically more difficult than other types of phrasal verbs.

The last category is aspectual phrasal verbs. Darwin and Gray (1999) note that aspectual verbs are "more transparent than those of idiomatic phrasal verbs but perhaps not as transparent as those of literal phrasal verbs" (p. 68). For aspectual phrasal verbs, the verb proper maintains a literal meaning while the adverbial particle cannot be understood literally, but does contribute some meaning to the lexical verb. An example of an aspectual phrasal verb is below.

(3) She was *cut off* from seeing her menacing boyfriend any further.

In this case, the particle (i.e., *off*) signals that the action is complete. Other examples of aspectual phrasal verbs include: *burn down*, *ate up*, and *drank up*.

As aspectual phrasal verbs overlap to a certain extent with the literal and figurative phrasal-verb types and are sometimes difficult to ascertain, the present study only considers the use of literal and figurative phrasal verbs, since they are most easily distinguishable.

Research on Avoiding English Phrasal Verbs

Dagut and Laufer (1985) tested for the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Hebrew learners of English, using three different tasks. These three tasks included (a) a multiple-choice (MC) task that provided Hebrew ESL learners with both the phrasal verbs and the corresponding one-word verb, (b) a memorization task that provided learners only with the phrasal verb, and (c) a translation task that provided learners with a Hebrew near-equivalent. The researchers found that the learners avoided certain phrasal verbs (e.g., *mix up*), preferring instead their one-word near-equivalents (e.g., *confuse*). Similar to Schachter's (1974) and Kleinmann's (1977) findings, Dagut and Laufer (1985) attributed their findings to structural differences between the L1 and L2 languages. They ascertained that their findings were due to the fact that phrasal verbs are a peculiarity of Germanic languages, which are distinctly different from the Hebrew language.

However, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) produced findings that countered their claims. Following Dagut and Laufer's (1985) method for eliciting data, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) tested for the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Dutch learners of English. Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) found contrary evidence to the results in Dagut and Laufer's (1985) study, instead finding that Dutch learners of English avoided phrasal verbs that they perceived as being too similar to the L1. Up to this point, most studies attributed avoidance to L1 and L2 differences, but this study suggested that L1 and L2 similarities are also a worthwhile consideration for why learners might avoid phrasal verbs.

Following these two studies, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) and Liao and Fukuya (2004) conducted research on avoidance using similar methodologies. Although Laufer and Eliasson's (1993) study reflected that the best predictor of avoidance was L1-L2 differences, Liao and Fukuya's (2004) study resulted in the consideration of other possibilities. They tested both Chinese EFL and ESL learners and found that learners appeared to go from a level of avoidance to non-avoidance in their interlanguage development. Although Liao and Fukuya (2004) acknowledged that L1-L2 differences are good predictors of avoidance, they concluded that exposure to L2 and level of proficiency appeared to play considerable roles in the avoidance of English phrasal verbs. Also, they found that Chinese participants tended to choose literal phrasal verbs (e.g., *come in*, *get in*, and *take away*) over figurative phrasal verbs

(e.g., *make up*, *put on*, and *run out*). Their study was unique in that it indicated that avoidance could be the result of multiple factors (e.g., L1-L2 differences, proficiency, and verb type), not just L1-L2 structural differences or similarities.

While Liao and Fukuya's (2004) study was important for highlighting the multiple factors that might influence learner avoidance, their study had several limitations. First, Liao and Fukuya (2004) chose to use phrasal verbs pertinent to American English, but they failed to address how they compiled their particular list of phrasal verbs. It would have been interesting to note whether they looked at a compilation of ESL/EFL textbooks, used native-speaker intuitions, or looked at a corpus of spoken data. Second, it would be important for the researchers to cross-reference the use of their chosen phrasal verbs in American English, and find what is often taught in EFL textbooks used in China, in order to determine whether learners might be familiar with the phrasal verbs included in their study. In order to determine why learners avoided some phrasal verbs, Liao and Fukuya (2004) needed to provide at least some evidence that the learners had knowledge of the phrasal verbs being tested. Third, the researchers suggested that a possible inclination towards avoidance could have been caused by the unequal distribution of figurative and literal phrasal verbs. This becomes an issue of significance in their study because the lack of equal distribution might have led participants to rely more often on some choices than others, possibly skewing the results of the study, especially since they calculated proportion scores, which are sensitive to the total number of phrasal verbs. Lastly, Liao and Fukuya (2004) used a recall task as part of their study. This particular task appears to have tested the memorization of phrasal verbs, rather than elicit actual use of phrasal verbs.

The Present Study

Based on previous avoidance research, it is evident that numerous factors influence the use of avoidance by L2 learners. In an attempt to provide a more in-depth look at avoidance in L2 acquisition, the present study addresses the limitations of the aforementioned avoidance studies, particularly those limitations outlined with respect to Liao and Fukuya (2004). Specifically, this study focuses on the avoidance of English phrasal verbs in order to answer the following research question: *Do L2 proficiency, learning context, task type, and phrasal verb type influence English L2 learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs?*

Method

Participants

Two groups of English language students (N = 52) participated in the present study. An English as a second language (ESL) group included L1 Chinese students (n = 22) studying English at a university in the southwestern United States. The ESL group was comprised of 11 advanced participants and 11 intermediate participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information for ESL Learners in the United States

Group	*n*	Demographics	
		Age (years)	Length of residence (months)
Advanced	11	28.50 (7.60)[a] 19–35[b]	20.00 (5.24) 12–60
Intermediate	11	21.10 (2.18) 18–24	4.10 (0.87) 3–5

Note. a represents mean average (standard deviation is in parentheses); *b* represents the range.

The advanced participants included 9 graduate students and 2 full-time ESL learners who were enrolled in Level 3 (the highest level) at the university's intensive English program (IEP). The nine graduate students were considered advanced learners, for they had all met the university's English language proficiency requirement (i.e., TOEFL iBT score of at least 85) and were enrolled in M.A. and Ph.D. graduate programs at the time of the study. The two full-time ESL learners in this group had already met the host university's English language proficiency requirement and were studying at the IEP to obtain higher TOEFL scores for entrance into other universities.

All of the intermediate participants were full-time ESL learners in the university's IEP. TOEFL scores were not available for most of the intermediate participants; therefore, their level of proficiency was determined by the fact that they were enrolled in Level 2 (high-intermediate) of the IEP.

The EFL group included L1 Chinese students (n = 30) studying English at a university in southeast China. For the EFL group, there

were a total of 16 advanced ESL participants and 14 intermediate participants (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Information for EFL Learners in China

Group	*n*	Demographics	
		Age (years)	Length of English Studies (years)
Advanced	16	26.70 (4.60)[a] 22–32[b]	14.50 (3.40) 10–19
Intermediate	14	19.3 (1.62) 18–20	8.43 (2.40) 5–11

Note. a represents mean average (standard deviation is in parentheses); *b* represents the range.

The advanced group included participants who were enrolled in Level 5 (advanced) at the university's English Language Center (ELC). The intermediate group included participants who were enrolled in Level 3 (intermediate) at the university ELC.

The proficiency level of participants in the two EFL groups was determined by an in-house placement test administered by the ELC at the beginning of the academic year. The placement test included assessment of the four language skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and included both selected-response and constructed-response items. The scores for each of the four sub-sections were combined to provide a cumulative score (out of 100 points), which was the basis for making placement decisions about incoming EFL students.

Materials

The materials consisted of three tasks[1] (translation task, MC task, and story re-tell task). Each task targeted 20 pairs of the same phrasal verbs and their one-word verb near-equivalents. These verbs were purposefully selected, as they represented the 20 most frequent phrasal verbs used in casual conversation, as determined by their high rates of occurrence in spoken corpora from the LSWE[2] Corpus (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, pp. 403–427). The frequency of phrasal verbs ranged from over 20 occurrences per million words to over 300 occurrences per million words. See Appendix A for the list of phrasal verbs.

Using the classification system outlined by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), phrasal verbs were also divided into either *figurative* or *literal* semantic categories. Overall, there were 10 figurative (5 transitive and 5 intransitive) and 10 literal (6 transitive and 4 intransitive) phrasal verbs for the present study. Each of the 20 verbs was categorized by three reviewers who were Ph.D. candidates in an Applied Linguistics program in the U.S. For the categorization task, the reviewers were first provided with definitions for the figurative and literal phrasal verbs, as well as contextualized examples for each verb type. Then, the reviewers were presented with a list of the 20 phrasal verbs, with corresponding example sentences, and they were asked to classify the verbs into one of three categories: 1) figurative, 2) literal, or 3) unsure. Finally, the reviewers were asked to briefly explain their categorization decisions. Overall, there was 100 percent agreement of classification of the phrasal verbs among all three reviewers.

Translation task. The translation task was based on 20 short dialogues taken from LSWE that provided contextual information. Casual dialogues were chosen for the translation task to reflect spoken language, rather than formal writing samples, since using casual dialogues can be seen to offer a better chance of making the participants understand that the phrasal verbs were being used in spoken English (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). All of the dialogues for the translation task were originally written in English and then translated by a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, who was a Ph.D. student in an Applied Linguistics program in the U.S., and was incidentally an advanced speaker of English. The task was then administered in the native language and participants were required to translate the underlined phrasal verbs into English. See Appendix B for the English version of the translation task.

Multiple-choice task. The MC task consisted of segments of the same 20 dialogues used in the translation task (see Appendix C). For each dialogue, the verb portion was left blank. After each dialogue, four choices were presented to the participants (in randomized order): the phrasal verb, its one-word near-equivalent, a distracter phrasal verb, and a one-word distracter. All one-word near-equivalent options were provided by the same three Ph.D. candidates, all native speakers of English, who reviewed the phrasal-verb classification system described above. To collect the one-word options, each of the three candidates was asked to complete the MC task (with only the target phrasal verb indicated) and provide two one-word near-equivalents for each dialogue,

whenever possible. Along with the researcher, the three reviewers then discussed the relevance and "fit" of all near-equivalents provided for each dialogue; together, consensus was reached as to which equivalents should be included in the final version of the form. The dialogues for the MC task were not translated into Chinese, since the purpose of this task was to determine if the participants chose the correct English phrasal verb or its one-word near-equivalent.

Story re-tell task. The story *Sam and Her Awful Day* was written by the researcher for this study. The story included 18 of the 20 phrasal verbs in the previous two tasks; two phrasal verbs (i.e., *put on* and *went off*) were excluded from the text as they could not be fit into the storyline. Once the story was written, it was reviewed by one of the aforementioned Ph.D. candidates to ensure that the storyline was clear and coherent. Finally, the story was translated by the same native speaker of Mandarin Chinese who assisted with the translation task. See Appendix D for the English version of the story re-tell task.

Self-report survey. The purpose of the survey was to collect demographic information about the participants, as well as to identify those phrasal verbs that participants believed they knew. The self-report survey included questions about participant age, the length of residence in the U.S., the number of years spent studying English, as well as a list of 24 phrasal verbs. The list included the 20 phrasal verbs used in the study, as well as four invented phrasal verbs to identify possible over-reporting of knowledge of the verbs. See Appendix E for the list of phrasal verbs included in the self-report survey.

Procedure

An individual 50–60 minute meeting with the researcher was scheduled for each participant. All meetings were held in private study rooms at a university library. Prior to administering the tasks, the researcher briefly explained the study. Participants were asked to complete the translation task first. For this task, participants were told to translate only the underlined verbs into English; they were given up to 15 minutes to complete all 20 dialogues. The participants were then asked to complete the MC task. In this task, each participant was asked to choose the verb that best completed the dialogue. Additionally, up to 15 minutes were given to complete this task; participants were asked to record all answers on the testing sheets.

The last task participants were asked to complete was the story re-tell task. For this task, participants were asked to read the entire story within 10 minutes. Participants were permitted to read the story multiple times during this period of time. However, they were not permitted to take notes about the story. In addition, the researcher explicitly encouraged each participant to pay particular attention to the actions taking place in the story. With respect to much of the second language acquisition research regarding *attention* (see Al-Hejin, 2005; Carroll, 2006), it was hoped that the explicit statement [of encouragement] would prompt students to pay more attention to the verbs, principally the target phrasal verbs, while reading the story.

Once participants indicated that they had finished reading the story, they were given one minute to think about what they wanted to say. It was assumed that allowing only one minute would prevent the participants from trying to memorize the entire story, as most people can easily memorize novel information, such as facts of a story, for up to one minute (Schwabe & Wolf, 2009). At the end of one minute, the researcher took away the story sheet and the participants were then given up to 10 minutes to re-tell as much of the story as they could remember in English; the researcher encouraged the participants to re-tell the events, using as much of the original language from the story as possible, in the order which the events occurred.

In addition, during each participant's story re-tell segment, the researcher asked a series of brief, impromptu comprehension questions (e.g., *Why did Sam go to the grocery store? What did Sam forget to do? What happened after the car drove onto the grass?*), in order to further prompt their use of the phrasal verbs from the story. Approximately 10–12 comprehension questions were asked for each participant. Each story was recorded on an IC Panasonic digital audio recorder.

After finishing the story re-tell task, participants were then asked to complete the phrasal verb knowledge self-report survey. As part of the survey, participants were asked to indicate which of the phrasal verbs targeted in the materials they knew; in this case, participants' knowledge of phrasal verbs was represented by those verbs for which participants reported they could provide a definition or could use appropriately in a sentence (see Paribakht & Wesche, 1996). Although this form of self-assessment might have some drawbacks (e.g., overestimating language knowledge and abilities), it was an important element in helping to determine the avoidance strategy of the ESL/EFL learners.

Specifically, the inclusion of the self-report survey enabled the researcher to establish which phrasal verbs the participants claimed to know, thus allowing the researcher to determine the phrasal verbs that might have been avoided in the study.

Design

A 2 × 2 × 3 × 2 mixed-method design was implemented to examine the impact of proficiency, learning context, task type, and verb type on the avoidance of phrasal verbs in L2 English. For the independent variables, the between-groups variables included proficiency group (i.e., intermediate and advanced) and learning context (i.e., ESL and EFL), while the within-groups variables included task type (i.e., translation, MC, and story re-tell) and verb type (i.e., figurative and literal). The dependent variable included the proportion scores for each of the three tasks used in the present study.

Analysis

Similar to Liao and Fukuya (2004), for all tasks, responses in which the participants chose the targeted phrasal verb correctly were given one point; responses in which the participants chose anything other than the targeted phrasal verb were given no points. However, the present study differed from Liao and Fukuya (2004) in that, based on the self-report survey, phrasal verbs that each participant reported having no knowledge of were removed from the analysis of that individual's performance on each of the three tasks. Only phrasal verbs that each participant reported knowing were scored for each individual's analysis.

Consequently, the total number of phrasal verbs varied by individual, and proportion scores were therefore calculated for each individual; in other words, each individual had three separate proportion scores, one for each task. Specifically, if participants indicated (on the self-report survey) that they knew 16 of the plausible phrasal verbs, their total possible points for the Translation and MC tasks could only be out of 16 points. Therefore, if they correctly identified 14 of these phrasal verbs on the translation and/or MC task, they would receive a proportion score of .875 (14/16). It is worth noting that anomalies did exist in the translation and MC tasks; that is, there were three instances in which individuals

claimed to know fewer phrasal verbs than they correctly identified in the two tasks. In these instances, the total possible points for the tasks were strictly based on the number of phrasal verbs they claimed to know from the survey.

Finally, a proportion score was also calculated in a similar manner for the story-retell task, however, the total possible points for this task were determined in light of the fact that two phrasal verbs (i.e., *put on* and *went off*) were excluded from the story. This meant that the total possible score could have been 18 (not 20) for each individual. Proportion scores were then used in the statistical tests. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Results

In order to examine whether learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs was affected by L2 proficiency, learning context, task type, or phrasal-verb type, the data were submitted to a linear mixed model. The results of the evaluation of the assumptions for normality and homogeneity of variance were satisfactory, indicating that the linear mixed model could be used.

Tables 3–5 provide the means and standard deviations for the context, task, and phrasal verb types. As shown in Table 3, for learners in the ESL context, both intermediate and advanced learners had higher proportion scores for the translation task, followed by the MC task and the story re-tell task.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Proportion Scores for Learner Groups across Three Tasks

		Task type		
Group	*N*	Translation	Multiple-choice	Story re-tell
ESL				
Intermediate	11	.80 (.15)	.61 (.19)	.31 (.12)
Advanced	11	.88 (.11)	.63 (.18)	.25 (.15)
EFL				
Intermediate	14	.44 (.26)	.62 (.27)	.59 (.27)
Advanced	16	.59 (.31)	.63 (.15)	.33 (.30)

Note. Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.

For the EFL context, intermediate learners had the highest proportion scores for the MC task, followed by the story re-tell task and the translation task. Advanced learners also had the highest proportion scores for the MC task, but this was followed by the translation task and the story re-tell task.

Table 4 indicates that intermediate ESL learners had nearly the same proportion scores for the literal and figurative phrasal verbs as the advanced ESL learners.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Proportion Scores for Learner Groups across Verb Types

		Verb type	
Group	*N*	Literal	Figurative
ESL			
Intermediate	11	.59 (.29)	.53 (.26)
Advanced	11	.53 (.29)	.56 (.30)
EFL			
Intermediate	14	.66 (.30)	.45 (.22)
Advanced	16	.68 (.28)	.51 (.25)

Note. Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.

Furthermore, proportion scores for the intermediate EFL learners and advanced EFL learners were nearly the same for the literal and figurative phrasal verbs.

Finally, Table 5 shows that the proportion scores for literal phrasal verbs were largest for the MC task, followed by the translation and story re-tell tasks. For the figurative phrasal verbs, the proportion scores were largest for the translation task, followed by the MC and story re-tell tasks.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations of Proportion Scores for Verb Types across Three Tasks

	Task type		
Verb type	Translation	Multiple-choice	Story re-tell
Literal	.66 (.18)	.76 (.20)	.38 (.22)
Figurative	.60 (.19)	.58 (.23)	.45 (.27)

Note. Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.

As illustrated in Table 6, there was only a significant main effect for task type $F(2, 83) = 27.95$, $p < .05$, while there were no significant main effects for proficiency, learning context, or phrasal-verb type. Approximately 31% ($\eta^2 = .31$) of the variation in proportion scores was attributable to differences between the three tasks. In addition, the linear mixed model indicated that there were three significant interactions: 1) learning context × task type, 2) context × verb type, and 3) task type × verb type.

Table 6. Summary of Significant Effects from Linear Mixed Model

Significant effects	*F*	*p*	η^2
Task type, *F* (2, 83)	27.95	.000	.31
Learning context × Task type, *F* (2, 83)	17.15	.000	.22
Learning context × Verb type, *F* (1, 124)	11.67	.001	.08
Task type × Verb type, *F* (2, 83)	4.18	.019	.06

Note. Only significant effects are shown.

Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the proportion scores for the three task types. The Bonferroni procedure was used to control for Type I error across the three pairwise comparisons ($\alpha' = .05/3 = .017$).

The results showed that there was significant difference in the mean proportion scores between the translation ($M = .68$) and story re-tell ($M = .39$) tasks and between the MC ($M = .62$) and story re-tell tasks. The effect sizes for these significant mean differences were 1.38 and 1.12, respectively (see Table 7).

Table 7. Bonferroni Post Hoc Results and Effect Size of Proportion Scores by Task Type

		Mean Differences (X_i - X_k) (Effect size is indicated in parentheses)		
Task type	Mean	1.	2.	3.
1. Translation	.68	--		
2. Multiple-choice	.62	.06	--	
3. Story re-tell	.39	.29* (1.38)	.23* (1.12)	--

* $p < .001$

Discussion

To summarize the findings, task type had a significant main effect on the avoidance of English phrasal verbs, while three significant interactions were found between context × task type, context × verb type, and task type × verb type. These significant effects will now be discussed in turn.

Task Type

The proportion of phrasal verbs selected and/or used varied across the three different tasks. Participants in the present study selected and/or used significantly more phrasal verbs for the MC and translation tasks when compared to the story re-tell task. With respect to the findings for the MC task, one possible explanation is that MC items require an answer within a rather narrow context. Learners are faced with a situation in which they are supplied with specific contextual information and limited possibilities with which to answer. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising that this type of task resulted in moderately high proportion scores. In looking at the translation task, participants also selected more phrasal verbs overall than they did for the story re-tell task. Given the goal of translation, which is to provide semantic equivalence between source and target languages (Hickey, 1998), there is a rather narrow context in which the learners have limited possibilities for answering. However, this task is set apart from the MC task since there are not always direct L1-L2 translations to consider, thus making the task potentially more challenging to appropriately use English phrasal verbs.

The story re-tell task appeared to provide the most concrete evidence for avoidance, where the previous studies on avoidance of phrasal verbs did not. While similar tasks from previous studies (recall task—Liao & Fukuya (2004) and memorization task—Hulstijn & Marchena (1989)) seemed to examine the ability to memorize the inclusion of phrasal verbs in sentences, the story re-tell task promotes oral discourse, which is the register in which these verb structures are traditionally produced. Even though they are indeed found across all registers, phrasal verbs (particularly intransitive types) are relatively rare in academic prose, and are used much more frequently in fiction and informal conversation (Darwin & Gray, 1999). As a result, this particular task signifies the occurrence of phrasal verbs in a fictional story, and also promotes the use of phrasal verbs through spoken language. Participants incorporated

significantly fewer phrasal verbs into the story re-tell task (compared to the MC and translation tasks), which could be due to the fact that this task was more of a production task, whereas the other two tasks were not. Therefore, when participants were supplied with limited choices and context, they were more likely to use English phrasal verbs, but when they were asked to produce the language orally, they relied more on one-word near-equivalents that they were familiar with (e.g., *happen* vs. *come off*; *quit* vs. *give up*; *make* vs. *make up*).

Context × Task Type

Most avoidance studies (e.g., Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989) have not investigated the possibility that learners from different learning contexts might demonstrate avoidance strategies to varying degrees. The present study considered the use of avoidance for Chinese ESL and EFL learners. The findings showed that both groups of learners had very similar proportion scores for the MC task, while the ESL learners had higher proportion scores for the translation task and the EFL learners had higher proportion scores for the story re-tell task. As Yang and Dai (2011) indicate, Chinese learners are well-known for studying word lists and their meanings in secondary and university-level classes; this suggests that they have passive knowledge of many lexical items (Nation, 2005). Therefore, many of the phrasal verb meanings could already be well-known to both groups of learners in this study, as both groups consisted of native speakers of Mandarin Chinese.

Furthermore, it seems plausible that the format of the MC task benefitted the test-laden nature of the Chinese educational system, which all participants in this study had experienced. As Stack (2011) suggests, the Chinese secondary and university systems rely heavily on intensive testing, whereupon students experience frequent batteries of standardized tests that largely utilize multiple-choice formats. Based on the results of the present study, it is possible that the Chinese students were able to demonstrate "test-wise strategies" (see Taylor & Weir, 2012) that could have enabled them to perform well on the MC task, as it is assumed that they were quite familiar with this particular format already. The Chinese learners might have been able to eliminate MC options, thus increasing the probability of answering the MC items correctly and increasing their overall proportion scores.

Interestingly, the ESL learners (both intermediate and advanced) in this study performed considerably better than the EFL learners for the translation task, but they were outperformed for the story re-tell task by the EFL learners. The results of the translation task are not altogether surprising, as it is assumed that an ESL learner's language base develops more quickly [than an EFL learner's base] due to their immersion in the target language culture (Laufer, 1997). This is likely because most L2 learners who study in a target language culture develop broader vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills from increased exposure to the target language. Living in an English-medium context, ESL learners are able to demonstrate their active knowledge of lexical items when prompted in different communicative situations requiring the target language (Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Nemati, 2010). In turn, this increased exposure might have helped to facilitate their ability to accurately translate from their native language to their second language. However, this explanation does not explain the fact that the intermediate EFL learners outperformed all other groups in the story re-tell task for the present study.

It was particularly surprising that the intermediate EFL learners had greater success using phrasal verbs for the story re-tell task, since the use of phrasal verbs is a peculiarity of spoken language (Dagut & Laufer, 1985), and learners in an EFL context typically have fewer English speaking opportunities. It was expected that the Chinese EFL learners, while being able to commit phrasal verb definitions to memory, thus demonstrating their passive knowledge of the phrasal verbs (as was evident in the MC task), would have had less success using the phrasal verbs contextually in spoken discourse, as this would require them to demonstrate active knowledge of the phrasal verbs. While it appears that the ESL learners avoided the use of phrasal verbs more so than the EFL learners for the story re-tell task (refer to Table 3), an alternative account could be explained by the proficiency differences of the participants. For instance, Nekrasova (2009) found that L2 speakers were able to recall more fixed lexical strings (i.e., lexical bundles), but used very few modifications of those strings. In contrast, L1 speakers recalled fewer fixed lexical items, but did show greater creativity with the reproduced strings. Relating those findings to the present study, many of the participants from the EFL groups, particularly the intermediate learners, were able to re-tell the story with more phrasal verbs because they internalized the verbs as fixed expressions and rarely modified the

phrasal verbs. However, for the ESL groups, particularly the advanced learners, the story was re-told with a greater variety of verbs. This phenomenon was also observed for the advanced EFL and intermediate ESL groups, but to a lesser extent, as the intermediate ESL learners demonstrated more creativity than the advanced EFL learners, but not as much as the advanced ESL learners.

Context × Verb Type

The findings indicated that the Chinese EFL learners used more literal phrasal verbs and fewer figurative phrasal verbs than the Chinese ESL learners. The higher proportion of literal phrasal verbs used by the Chinese EFL learners could be attributed to L1-L2 similarities between Chinese and English. In both languages, phrasal verb meaning is derived from two individual components (verb + particle) with their own semantic properties. For phrasal verbs with literal meanings, when these two components are combined, the particle functions to provide additional directional meaning for the existing verb. For example, in Chinese, combining *guo* (go) + *qu* (over there) results in a straightforward meaning, *guoqu* (go over there) (Liao & Fukuya, 2004); the same is true for literal phrasal verbs in English (e.g., *sit* + *down* or *pick* + *up*). The derived meaning from the two combined components is rather transparent for both languages. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese EFL learners can deduce the meaning of most literal phrasal verbs in English by examining the individual verb + particle.

While the semantic function of literal phrasal verbs in Chinese and English are somewhat similar, the former makes use of very few figurative phrasal verbs (Liao & Fukuya, 2004). This may pose a problem for Chinese EFL learners, as English has a considerable number of phrasal verbs with figurative meanings, most of which require contextual knowledge to understand (e.g., *check in*, *hang out*, and *kick back*). Just as a native speaker of English, Chinese EFL learners would need significant exposure to input containing figurative phrasal verbs while learning English. Logically, this would most likely need to happen in the U.S. (or another English speaking country). While Chinese EFL learners could develop their passive knowledge of some figurative phrasal verb meanings while learning English in China, their active knowledge of figurative phrasal verbs would not likely be as developed

as their passive knowledge. This is because they do not get many opportunities to participate in conversational English while learning the language in China (Yang & Dai, 2011); therefore, they are not able to use their lexical knowledge for communicative purposes. In this case, the Chinese ESL learners probably gained an advantage in acquiring figurative phrasal verbs because they were able to develop their active knowledge of these verbs through conversations with native English speakers in the U.S.

Task Type × Verb Type

For both the MC task and the translation task, the proportions for correct literal phrasal verbs were higher than for figurative phrasal verbs. The opposite was true for the story re-tell task, as the proportions for correct figurative phrasal verbs was higher than for literal phrasal verbs. While the findings for the MC and translation tasks are not entirely surprising, since the meanings of literal phrasal verbs are more salient than figurative phrasal verbs (Darwin & Gray, 1999), the results of the story re-tell task were somewhat unexpected. It might have been expected that the Chinese ESL and EFL learners would demonstrate avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs for this story re-tell task, given their preference for literal phrasal verbs in the other two tasks. A likely explanation could be that the participants focused more of their attention on the figurative phrasal verbs than the literal phrasal verbs. According to Schmidt (2010), focusing one's attention on specific features in the input can lead to the identification and retention of meaning. In this sense, the participants could have directed more of their attention to the figurative phrasal verbs, as their inclusion in the story was more marked for participants, but nonetheless important for understanding the narration of events in the storyline.

Support for this explanation was provided in discussions between the researcher and several of the participants during the piloting phase of the study. Prior to administering the three tasks used for actual data collection, the tasks were piloted with five participants who were asked to comment on the tasks and discuss any insights they had regarding the research project. With respect to the story re-tell task, several of the participants commented that they noticed the use of many multi-word verbs in the story, which required them to pay more attention to the meanings of many of those same verbs. Most of the pilot study

participants claimed that their attention was drawn to several phrasal verbs in particular (*come on*, *give up*, *make up*, and *run out*), all of which were considered figurative for the present study. Participants' comments from the interviews suggested that, although they were familiar with several meanings for these multi-word verbs, they had to take additional time to determine which meaning was most appropriate for the given context. By doing so, the participants' attention appears to have been consciously focused on many of the figurative phrasal verbs, which resulted in being able to reconstruct much of the story with those phrasal verbs in mind.

Implications

First, the findings of this study are significant because it is important to recognize avoidance as a possible strategy demonstrated by L2 learners of English. Researchers and teachers need to be aware that, despite the fact that L2 learners might have knowledge of certain phrasal verbs, they still avoid them in certain contexts where they cannot actively produce them. A second implication is that learners in EFL contexts might need additional input, in order to have more exposure to English phrasal verbs, as well as additional output opportunities in which they need to use phrasal verbs, particularly highly-frequent figurative phrasal verbs. One final implication is that the types of tasks that are used to measure knowledge and/or use can greatly affect whether or not L2 learners utilize avoidance as a strategy. As a result, the types of tasks that are used to measure L2 acquisition must be carefully considered and developed.

Limitations

Although the present study does demonstrate the manifestation of avoidance, it is not without limitations. First, a larger sample size would have allowed for more definitive results and would have given the researcher a clearer perspective on learners' avoidance patterns. Also, this study did not implement a counter-balanced design within each learning context across the three tasks. The purpose of counter-balancing is to reduce the order effect of tasks across different treatment conditions (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012). Without counter-balancing in the present study, it is possible that there was a practice or a fatigue effect, which

could have influenced the results. However, a complete (or even partial) counter-balance design would have required a substantially larger number of participants that was not feasible. In addition, the effectiveness of some of the items included in the study is debatable, particularly with respect to items in the MC task, as alternative verbs were plausible but not given as options (e.g., *hurry up* in Item #1; *abandoned* in Item #20). As a result, it is possible that the participants were forced to choose phrasal verbs and/or one-word near-equivalents that would not have otherwise been chosen if the participants were free to provide their own alternatives. Finally, other language features need to be tested to see in which areas of language learning avoidance occurs. Other studies have looked into the avoidance of relative clauses and negation in English (see Kamimoto et al., 1992; Vázquez, 2005), but still more structural features of second languages need to be considered.

Conclusion

This study investigated whether L2 proficiency, learning context, task type, and phrasal verb type influence Chinese EFL and ESL learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs. The results of the study indicate that the avoidance demonstrated by these learners of English is largely influenced by task type, as well as the interaction of different learner variables, such as learning context and verb type. While this study does have certain limitations, the phenomenon of avoidance warrants further consideration as second language researchers attempt to understand how language is acquired. Future research that seeks to investigate avoidance can borrow from this study's existing methodology to determine which factors are likely to influence avoidance behaviors.

Notes

1. *Task* is used in the general sense (i.e., an activity that an individual is required to complete (Davies, Brown, Elder, Lumley, MacNamara, & Hill, 1999).
2. LSWE refers to the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English corpus.

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Appendix A

Phrasal-Verb Types and Their Distribution in Conversation

Figurative (occurrences per million words)

Over 300

Come on

Over 200

Going on

Over 100

Find out

Over 40

Put on Went off Came off Ran out

Over 20

Make up Gave up Stand up to

Literal (occurrences per million words)

Over 200

Get up

Over 100

Got in

Over 40

Get out Come over Pick up Get back Get off

Over 20

Take off Took away Come along

Appendix B

Task I (Non-Translated Version)

Directions: Read the following 20 dialogues and then translate the Chinese verb that best completes each sentence into English. Write your response in English in the space provided. Keep in mind, you can choose either one-word or multi-word verbs. You will have approximately 15 minutes to complete this task.

1. She should just learn to stand up to him sometimes.
2. He didn't care about losing the money. He just wanted to get back his credit cards.
3. She was shy, so she wouldn't take off her clothes in front of the doctor.
4. I thought I told you to get out of here!
5. Did you put on some weight recently?
6. Would you please come on!
7. The alarm went off sometime after midnight.
8. Her parents took away the car because she was caught driving after she was drinking.
9. We need to buy a garbage can, because the neighbors don't like to pick up our trash.
10. He would get up at noon every day.
11. My student always makes up excuses for not attending class.
12. Why didn't you come over last night?
13. Don't take the first girl that comes along either.
14. We got in the car just before it started raining.
15. My subscription ran out last month.
16. The drunk man wouldn't get off the bus.
17. The trip to Las Vegas came off as scheduled.
18. I can't believe what's going on at that place.
19. They gave up the idea to travel to Beijing this summer.
20. Let's not tell him now. I don't want him to find out the terrible news just yet.

Appendix C

Task II

Directions: Read the following 20 dialogues below and then circle the letter [A, B, C, or D] of the word that **best** completes the blank space. You will have approximately 15 minutes to complete this task.

1. – "I can't stand it when we're late. Would you please _____!"

   - "Alright, I'm coming. Just wait a minute!"

   A. come on B. hurry C. forget D. come across

2. – "He's so lazy. He would _____ at noon everyday and watch TV.

   - "Why don't you ask him to find a job then?"

   A. claim B. calm down C. awake D. get up

3. – "So, how did things go at the doctor's office today?"

   - "Well, she was shy, so she wouldn't _____ her clothes in front of the doctor."

   A. remove B. tune in C. take off D. improve

4. – "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to _____ here!"

   - "Okay, okay. I'm leaving. Calm down."

   A. enter B. leave C. get out of D. look up

5. – "Why didn't you _____ last night?"

   - "I know, I'm sorry. I just got so busy with my work."

   A. abolish B. come over C. let down D. visit

6. – "He always yells at her about the work she does or doesn't do around the house."

   - "She should just learn to _____ him sometimes."

   A. stand up to B. invite C. run into D. confront

7. – “So, when did this actually happen last night?”

   - “The alarm _____ sometime after midnight.”

   A. went off B. claimed C. sounded D. set up

8. – “We _____ the car just before it started raining.”

   - “Wow! You were lucky because we got soaked.”

   A. lifted B. showed up C. entered D. got in

9. – “We need to buy a garbage can, because the neighbors don’t like to _____ our trash.”

   - “Yeah, they seemed kinda upset about our trash always blowing into their yard.”

   A. turn out B. pick up C. collect D. wash

10. – “Did you _____ some weight recently?”

    - “Actually, I gained a couple pounds because I stopped jogging in the morning.”

    A. put on B. gain C. stand up to D. rise

11. – “Did you see all the changes that Bill made in the store?”

    - “Yeah. I can’t believe what’s _____ at that place.”

    A. waiting B. tuning in C. happening D. going on

12. – “Someone’s gotta tell Andy what happened.”

    - “Let’s not tell him now. I don’t want him to _____ the terrible news just yet.

    A. move on B. discover C. find out D. disappoint

13. – “Her parents _____ the car because she was caught driving after she was drinking.”

    - “It sounds like it was her own fault then. I don’t feel bad for her.”

    A. removed B. offended C. took away D. pointed out

14. – "Was he mad about the missing money?"

    - "He didn't care about losing the money. He just wanted to _____ his credit cards."

    A. recover B. get back C. take on D. solve

15. – "The drunk man wouldn't _____ the bus."

    - "So, what did the driver do? Did he stop the bus?"

    A. reply B. get off C. shut up D. exit

16. – "Hey, good to see you back. How was the trip to Vegas?"

    - "The trip to Las Vegas _____ as scheduled."

    A. occurred B. took over C. released D. came off

17. – "What happened to all the magazines you were getting?"

    - "My subscription _____ last month."

    A. turned out B. exploded C. ran out D. expired

18. – "I don't care who it is, I'll date anyone at the moment."

    - "C'mon, don't take the first girl that _____ either."

    A. comes along B. appears C. goes away D. captures

19. – "My student always _____ excuses for not attending class."

    - "Do you believe what she says?"

    A. invents B. misses C. drops in D. makes up

20. – "They _____ the idea to travel to Beijing this summer."

    - "But that's all they used to talk about. Was the money tight?"

    A. took over B. gave up C. answered D. stopped

Appendix D

Task III (Non-Translated version)

Directions: Please read the following story: *Sam and Her Awful Day*. After you finish the story, the paper will be taken away and you will be asked to re-tell the story to the researcher. You will have approximately 10 minutes to complete the reading.

Sam and Her Awful Day

Yesterday Sam went to the grocery store because she ran out *of* eggs. While she was walking towards the bus stop she realized that she had forgotten to take off her skirt. It was getting cold in Flagstaff, and so she went back home to change clothes. However, as Sam got near to her house, her neighbors were yelling, "Sam, come on…get over here!" At first she didn't know what was going on, but she sensed the concern on their faces. Just then, a loud crash happened, like glass exploding. BANG!!! Sam turned around just in time to see a bus smashing into her brand new house. She couldn't believe it! She was shocked. "I knew I shouldn't have gotten up today. I should have just stayed in bed", Sam thought to herself. At this point, two of Sam's neighbors were beside the bus yelling for the driver to get out of the bus. Finally, the door opened and the driver got off the empty bus. Sam was even more shocked to find out that a small dog was actually the driver of the troublesome bus. "What was a dog doing driving the bus?" It's not every day that a dog comes along driving a bus.

While everyone waited around for the police to come, Sam began to pick up pieces of her destroyed home. She just couldn't understand how a dog could get in the bus, start it and then drive it away. At that moment she began to cry. "I'll never get back all the things that were destroyed by this damn bus!" Her neighbor Robert asked her to come over to his place and relax, but Sam just sat there frozen, like ice.

Suddenly, a car came screeching into the grass. The door flew open and a tall man got out of the car. He ran up to the neighbor, took away the small dog and began walking toward the car, as if to leave. Sam yelled, "Wait!" She was determined to stand up to this man and make him pay for the damage his stupid dog caused. As she approached the man, she heard him trying to make up an excuse, but she actually didn't

care. She recognized the stranger immediately; it was her brother Tim. "Awww, it's you. I give up! This is the second time this year your dog has destroyed something of mine. First my car, now my house. What next?" She sat down in the grass, and thought, "Nothing came off as it should have today. I'm going back home to my bed."

Note. Phrasal verbs are underlined here to indicate the target phrasal verbs for the study. The phrasal verbs were not highlighted in the actual version presented to the participants.

Appendix E

Self-Report Survey

1) What is your age?

2) How long have you lived in the United States?

3) How long have you been studying English?

4) Circle those phrasal verbs for which you know that you could provide *at least* one clear definition:

come on	ask down*	come along
get up	put on	make up
chip up*	going on	gave up
get out (of)	took away	find out
come over	get back	take off
stand up to	get off	pick up
went off	let after*	come off
got in	ran out (of)	show away*

Note. Asterisks (*) are included here to indicate the four invented phrasal verbs. These verbs were not denoted in the actual self-report survey administered to participants.