

Another Look at Teaching Approaches to Teaching English Prepositions in Phrasal Verbs in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims to compare the differences between the “Communicative Approach” and the “Cognitive Approach” to teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs in Thailand. The benefits and limitations of both approaches as identified and analyzed in previously conducted research both in Thailand and abroad are addressed in this paper. The author suggests that teachers should apply both the “Communicative Approach” and the “Cognitive Approach” to teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs to Thai learners of English. Students can learn English prepositions in phrasal verbs implicitly through schemas in their minds and they can practice communicative skills by performing assigned tasks.

Keywords: Cognitive Approach; Communicative Approach; Teaching English Prepositions in Phrasal Verbs

Introduction

English has become an international language used all over the world as a second language. In Thailand, it has long been regarded as an important and significant subject at all levels of Thai education. As such, all students have been required to study it for decades. Although they have studied it for many years, Thai students still have problems studying and learning English effectively.

One of the leading causes of the difficulties experienced by Thai students is a concept known as “Language Transfer”. Thai and English have different structures and during the process of “Language Transfer” a student improperly transfers structures from one language to the next. This theory was first introduced by Kellerman and Smith (1986) who described it with the term ‘Crosslinguistic Influence’; a concept that “is theory-neutral, allowing one to subsume under one heading such phenomena as ‘transfer’, ‘influence’, ‘avoidance’, ‘borrowing’ and L2-related aspects of language loss thus permitting discussion of the similarities and differences between these phenomena” (1986: 1). Some previous studies confirm that Thai students experience difficulty when studying English and suffer low English competency because of “Language Transfer”. The problems of “Language Transfer” are varied. Studies have shown that it manifests itself in writing such as wrong word choice, incorrect sentence structure, and improper use of articles and prepositions (Bennui, 2008; Pongpairroj, 2002; Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013).

English prepositions are grammar elements that are highly susceptible to improper use because of the learners’ transfer from Thai to English. It is widely known that the problems in teaching and learning English prepositions are a result of their different structures and meanings in the two languages. In terms of meanings between English and Thai; for example, Bennui (2008) explained that the Thai word ‘Kab’ (กับ) can mean ‘with’, ‘at’ or ‘to’ in Thai as shown in following examples where in the transfer results in incorrect English. :

1. “I stay **with** home.” (In English, this is not correct. ‘I stay at home’ is correct.)

“Chan Yoo **Kab** Ban” (in Thai)

2. “I smiled **with** my new friends.” (In English, this is correct.)

“Chan Yim **Kab** Purn Mai Kong Chan” (in Thai)

In terms of structure, Thai prepositions are not always prepositions, but can be categorized as verbs, nouns, conjunctions, and derivations of words (Warotamasikkhadit, 1990; Indrambarya, 1995). For example, in the sentence “พ่อ กิน ข้าว กับ แม่ (father eats rice with mother)”, “กับ” or “with” is used as conjunction (Warotamasikkhadit, 1990: 74). For many reasons, English prepositions are quite difficult and confusing for Thai learners.

English phrasal verbs are regarded as one of the most complicated elements of English grammar for second language learners. As discussed above, prepositions are inherently difficult. Combining prepositions with additional words to form various types of phrasal verbs (verbs and prepositions) only enhances the grammatical difficulty for Thai students. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1998 cited in Lee 2012: 52) categorized phrasal verbs into three types.

1) Literal phrasal verbs: meanings of the prepositions are quite literal-the meaning is what someone would ordinarily think the meaning would be and the phrasal verb has a direct, easy to understand meaning, such as *stand up*, *fall down*, and *pass through*.

2) Aspectual phrasal verbs: meanings of prepositions are neither literal nor idiomatic, such as *take off*, *carry on*, and *write over*.

3) Idiomatic phrasal verbs: meanings are beyond the literal meaning of the original verb and preposition, such as *chew out*, *tune out*, and *catch up*.

Because of the number of different kinds of phrasal verbs, it is easy to understand why Thai learners have difficulty learning English prepositions in phrasal verbs. Therefore, this paper will address how both the “Communicative Approach” and the “Cognitive Approach” can be utilized to combat this difficulty and attempt to identify effective methods

to teach English prepositions in phrasal verbs to Thai students.

Approaches to teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs

I. Communicative Approach

a. Characteristics

The “Communicative Approach” is an approach which is under communicative view of language or it can be called as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It was first introduced as “Communicative Competence” by Hymes (1972 cited in Bagaric, 2007: 95). “Communicative Competence” is a teaching strategy that focuses on using grammatical competence in various situations. To practice grammar in order to develop fluency, PPP (presentation-practice-production) was introduced. This is grammar-based methodology that provides learners an opportunity to produce their own content or new structures through drills in conversation or text explained by teachers (Richards, 2006). It seems that students produce learned grammar in class in order to understand grammar usage. Ellis (2003) pointed out that PPP is not a real CLT as the methodology is grammar based rather than communicative purpose. CLT is a teaching approach that aims at requiring learners to practice using language primarily to learn how to communicate (Whong, 2011: 183). Hence, it can be said that CLT is real communication rather than producing particular grammar. Littlewood (1998) explained that a teacher’s role in this approach that is to prepare communicative activities that provide opportunities for learners to practice by guiding them to know necessary grammar. For example, students can practice communication by using target features from daily lives situation such as borrowing a book from a library or helping a kid put on clothes (Long, 1985 cited in Ellis 2003: 6). It has been suggested that CLT is the best approach to learning a language. Practicing it and using it in real world situations, which teaches skills suitable both inside and outside the classroom, is better than characterizing it as a single grammar (Long, 1991). It can be said that “Communicative Approach” does not focus only on particular grammar, it also includes how learners can use language in real communication.

The “Communicative Approach” has been seriously considered as a viable alternative approach to teaching. . Many researchers such as Efrizal (2012) and Ahmad and Rao (2013) have suggested this approach. Efrizal said that students could improve communicative ability from this approach. Ahmad and Rao agreed that this approach can motivate students to improve their communicative skill.

b. Advantages

Previous studies have analyzed its characteristics and have identified the advantages of this approach. First, students can learn from the meaning of the language rather than its structure. Fotos and Ellis (1991), Nunan (1989), and Littlewood (1998) pointed out that the “Communicative Approach” allows learners to directly learn the target language or L2 by interacting and focusing on the meaning rather than by directly learning from rules. This can help them to focus on both form and meaning. In a study specifically addressing the teaching of English prepositions in phrasal verbs, Buyukkarci (2010) divided participants into two groups: a group taught using the “Communicative Approach” (an experimental group) and a group taught using a “Traditional Approach” (a control group). The participants in the experimental group learned English phrasal verbs through participation in various activities such as games, role plays, simulations, and tasks based on authentic materials. On the other hand, the participants in the control group learned English phrasal verbs through explaining the meanings of phrasal verbs and filling in the blanks. A comparison of the post-test scores of both groups showed that the experimental group performed higher on the exam. In addition, Pongsai (2010) used English songs to Thai Buddhist secondary students in teaching English phrasal verbs and found that the mean score rose significantly from 0.23 in the pre-test to 10.18 in the post-test. These studies show that students can learn and better understand the meanings by using language in various situations rather than by simply remembering structures.

Another advantage of the ‘Communicative’ Approach’ is that learners can practice communication through participation in activities

or tasks based on authentic materials such as magazines and newspaper. Ellis (2003: 6) suggested that authentic materials can be used to create tasks such as telling stories, describing pictures or any other activity involving the learners' daily lives. In addition to participating in various activities such as those used by Buyukkarci (2010) and the use of English songs as in Pongsai (2010), Khumbangly (2005) and Tongpoon et al. (2011) studied the application of authentic materials to programmed instructions. Khumbangly (2005) compared teaching adverb particles by the "Communicative Approach" with the "Traditional Approach" and used programmed instruction. One group of students were instructed and taught to construct lexical units with various meanings from adverb particles through programmed instruction on computers. Another group of participants was taught to memorize meanings of phrasal verbs by using the "Traditional Approach". The students completed a multiple choice pre-test and post-test. The study showed that the participants who learned from the programmed instruction were less confused when learning phrasal verbs than those who learned from the "Traditional Approach" since they could apply their knowledge to various situations more so than those who memorize the definitions. The first group did better on the post-test reading passage (7% to 63%), did better replacing verbs in surrounding contexts (7% to 77%), and in eliciting the best adverb particle for a sentence (46% to 67%). The participants' pre-test and post-test scores increased significantly in all three areas.

Similarly, Tongpoon et al. (2011) analyzed the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in teaching first-year Thai- English major university students. The CALL consisted of ten chapters which consisted of ten English phrasal verbs in each chapter. The students studied on their own by following the program instructions. They heard the pronunciation, applied the phrasal verbs to authentic situations, and saw numerous pictures in which both English and Thai meanings were provided. They were asked to complete a multiple choice pre-test and post-test evaluation and a questionnaire regarding the program. The study found the students improved English phrasal verbs usage from pre-test to

post-test (Mean 15.93 and 27.27 respectively) and satisfied CALL (Mean 4.2 out of 5).

c. Limitation

Although the “Communicative Approach” can be helpful in teaching prepositions in phrasal verbs, there is a limitation as well.

Because the main objective of the “Communicative Approach” is creating communicative skill through participation in activities or tasks to learn a particular grammar feature, it cannot be guaranteed that the students can learn and use the target feature in the long term. The research of Buyukkarci (2010), Khumbangly (2005), Pongsai (2010), and Tongpoon et al. (2011) asserts no evidence indicating that learners can learn English prepositions in phrasal verbs and retain that knowledge for long term use the sole advantage seems to be the opportunity to merely practice and develop communicative skill.

In conclusion, it seems that the “Communicative Approach” may be appropriate for teaching prepositions in phrasal verbs since students can practice their communication skills by participating in and creating various situations. According to the research of Buyukkarci (2010) and Khumbangly (2005), it can be seen that the “Communicative Approach” is more effective than the “Traditional Approach”. The studies of Khumbangly (2005), Buyukkarci (2010), Pongsai (2010), Tongpoon et al. (2011) indicate that authentic materials, programmed instruction, and songs can both motivate and help the students to practice communication by using specific prepositions in phrasal verbs. However, some researchers, such as the study of Tongpoon et al. (2011) and Pongsai (2010) did not compare the “Communicative Approach” to other approaches. Thus, the students’ improvement may be because they have already learnt the target prepositions and phrasal verbs in class and not necessarily because of the teaching approach.

II. Cognitive Approach

a. Characteristics

The “Cognitive Approach” is an approach related to

the psychological process. Ellis (1990) stated that this approach aims at presenting how knowledge originates, how learners apply techniques to transfer their knowledge, and how new information is integrated into their existing knowledge. Because this approach suggests that learners develop their complicated language input in their minds from assigned activities, the concept of “Input Processing” will be explained in this paper in order to understand how learners transfer the language input in learning English prepositions in phrasal verbs.



Figure 1. Processes Involved in L2 Acquisition (from VanPatten 1996: 164)

Figure 1: Input Processing

“Input Processing” (IP) was introduced by VanPatten (1996: 164 cited in Achard, 2004) and suggests that learners convert information from “Input” (what they acquire) to “Intake” (what they comprehend) by transforming “Input” to symbolic units in their mind. According to IP, knowledge from teachers is “Input”. Learners then convert “Input” to “Intake” by conforming what they have learnt to their own understanding by creating schemas in their minds. Since English prepositions in phrasal verbs are sometimes beyond literal meanings, the process from “Input” to “Intake” is significant so that learners can learn them effectively. Lee (2012) said that phrasal verbs in cognitive linguistics were perceived as meanings in terms of schemas instead of literal meanings.

In teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs, many researchers have applied IP in their studies. For example, Thibeau (1999) assigned participants to learn English phrasal verbs from meaningful pictures in diagrams and class activities such as answering yes/no and multiple choice questions, completing sentences, and written narration. Additionally, Ganji

(2011), Waehayi (2012), and Lee (2012) prepared class activities relating to schemas which will be discussed later.

b. Advantages

This approach has many benefits. First, students can discover the complexity of complicated target features. Ellis (1990) said that the “Cognitive Approach” is considered to be complicated. Learners use a number of tactics to defeat limited existing knowledge in their minds, so that learning process will happen when the learner takes time to practice. This is because the students find rules by themselves through cognitive process from performing tasks or activities assigned by teachers. In teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs, White (2012) proposed five steps in order to help students learn step by step through the “Conceptual Approach”. He explained that participants were first taught by image. In this stage, the class was asked to share their ideas and experiences of each phrasal verb. He called this the “zone of activity”. Next, the students were encouraged to learn English phrasal verbs from authentic materials. Step three would be discussion of meanings in small groups. After that, the teacher would let the students draw pictures to show the meanings of phrasal verbs. Lastly, the students would share their drawings. According to White (2012), he applied these five steps to fifteen students from each of two sections of a class entitled English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and asked the participants to participate in pre-instruction and post-instruction tasks in which they were required to explain the meanings of target phrasal verbs from short dialogues. After examining the results, it was found that the students did better in the target phrasal verbs containing the prepositions “down” and “in” than those containing “off” and “through” in the pre-instruction task. Overall, fourteen students had better scores in the post-instruction task, ten of them got the same score, and six of them got a lower scores. The students commented in the questionnaires after performing the activities that they were fun and interesting. The five steps proposed by White could encourage the students to implicitly develop their knowledge through images and contexts in learning English phrasal verbs through use of the “Cognitive

Approach” by converting “Input” (images and authentic materials) to “Intake” (meanings through their drawings).

The second advantage of the ‘Cognitive Approach’ is that students can retain their knowledge in the long run. Waehayi (2012) applied the “Cognitive Approach” to 6th grade Thai students at Thakamwittayakarn School in Pattani, Thailand and asked the students to take a pre-test and post-test which both consisted of multiple choice, matching, and fill in the blank questions, and sentence construction tasks. The study indicated that the respondents could retain what they learned for two weeks after taking the post-test. Also, Lee (2012) focused on using “Conceptual Metaphors” by applying Concept-Based Instruction (CBI) and Schemas for the Orienting Basis of Action (SCOBAS). The researcher first introduced sentence examples with various particles and students were asked to share ideas about the meanings of the particles in each sentence example. Then the researcher introduced the “Conceptual Metaphor” and SCOBAS in order to see various contexts of each particle. This study focused on the three particles out, up, and over. Pre-test and Post-test were given which consisted of multiple choice and short answer question. Also, questionnaires, interviews, classroom recordings, assignments, and performance on tasks were also considered. The researcher believed that students could better understand phrasal verb semantics from participating in a number of activities. The study found that CBI could help the participant’s better comprehend the semantics of particle and phrasal verbs. In addition, the post-test results indicated that the rate of guessing the meaning of phrasal verbs decreased. It can be suggested that participants can develop their language input through use of the “Cognitive Approach” because they develop their knowledge from “Input” (various sentence examples) to “Intake” (meanings through “Conceptual Metaphor” and SCOBAS).

c. Limitation

There is no certainty that using the “Cognitive Approach” would be useful in teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs as students are not used to that method of learning may not be ready to learn

target features through the “Cognitive Approach”. Ganji (2011) compared three teaching methods used on three groups; a control group (memorize phrasal verbs in a traditional approach), experimental group I (learned from the context of a sentence and created a new one), and experimental group II (learned from use of Conceptual Metaphors). The respondents in each group were fifteen university students in Iran. They needed to take three tests: 1) fill in the blanks two hours after treatment (test I), 2) re-take the first test five weeks later (test II), and 3) take another test which were twenty untaught phrasal verbs consisting of the same verb particles as the participants learned in class (test III). The results showed there was no difference in test I among the three groups. This was because they all had learned the target phrasal verbs prior to the exam. Both experimental group I and experimental group II had a better performance than the control group in test II; experimental group II got the highest mean score. Interestingly, all three groups did better in test III than the other two tests, but experimental group II got the highest mean score. However, Ganji concluded that the participants in experimental group I and II may not have gotten used to the teaching approaches applied to them. In learning from contexts in experimental group I, the participants may have needed more time and examples to guide them and help them guess the meanings of the target words. Also, in learning from conceptual metaphors in experimental group II, it may have been hard for the participants to learn the target words by heart in a limited time. In other word, students may suffer from the teaching approaches that were applied to them because they were unfamiliar with those approaches. Schmidt (2010) said that individual differences in learners, such as motivation, background knowledge, and learning styles, could affect their inability to recognize and convert language input. Because the “Cognitive Approach” is quite new for learners, learners’ ability to notice language features and convert them from “Input” to “Intake” is sometimes rather limited.

In conclusion, the “Cognitive Approach” is an alternative way to teach English prepositions in phrasal verbs. This approach helps students to think beyond literal meanings thereby expanding those

meanings to new meanings in various contexts through the development of schemas. It has also been shown that students can retain their knowledge for a longer period of time when taught using the “Cognitive Approach”. Nevertheless, teachers should carefully plan and design activities since some students may get confused.

Discussion and Conclusion

English prepositions in phrasal verbs are a confusing English grammar element for Thai students. The differences between English and Thai structures and contexts require an effective teaching approach that can motivate students to learn confusing grammar and help them to overcome this difficulty. Using the “Communicative Approach” and the “Cognitive Approach” have been suggested and explained here as ways to help learners.

The “Communicative Approach” is regarded as an effective approach in English language teaching since it focuses on real communication. As previously discussed, this approach has been recommended by many researchers in teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs (Khumbangly, 2005; Buyukkarci, 2010; Pongsai, 2010; Tongpoon et al., 2011). Because prepositions in phrasal verbs are quite confusing for Thai learners, yet very important, it cannot be denied that learning them and being able to use them in the long run are also significant. However, using the “Communicative Approach” cannot guarantee that teaching and learning English prepositions in phrasal verbs can help learners remember them and use them in the long term.

Because of the limitations of using the “Communicative Approach”, using the “Cognitive Approach” has also been discussed and suggested. In the “Cognitive Approach”, students can convert language input to language intake and implicitly learn through images or schemas from participating in assigned tasks provided by teachers. This will help them to find rules by themselves and sometimes practice communicative tasks. Hence, the “Cognitive Approach” seems to be better than the “Communicative Approach”. Some researchers (Thibeau, 1999; Waehayi,

2012; Lee, 2012; White, 2012) focused on this approach as one of the best approaches to teaching English prepositions in phrasal verbs. However, Ganji (2011) concluded that students may find it very difficult in limited time to learn English prepositions in phrasal verbs through schemas in their minds because it is a concept that is quite new to them.

Both the “Communicative Approach” and the “Cognitive Approach” have advantages and disadvantages. In teaching prepositions in phrasal verbs in Thailand, the “Communicative Approach” might not be effective since some students may be shy to practice communicative skill. Pawapatcharandom (2007:54) said that because Thai secondary school students are accustomed to being passive learners, even when they go to study at a university they still wait for teachers to tell them the grammatical rules. It is a teacher’s role to motivate and control the class to ensure that all students participate in communicative activities. It is suggested that teachers use the “Cognitive Approach” at the beginning of the class if students are shy to perform communicative skill. Then teachers can let the students practice communication after they transfer the language input from “Input” to “Intake”. In this case, the students would be more confident and ready to practice communicative tasks. In other words, students can both implicitly learn English prepositions in phrasal verbs through images or schemas and practice communicative skill at the same time.

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