

Integrating Corpus Insights in Representation of Phrasal Verbs for ESL Learners: A Case Study of NCERT English Textbooks

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ABSTRACT The present study examines the representation of phrasal verbs in the English textbooks of classes 1 to 3 published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) of India. The focus is to point out whether the representation of phrasal verbs adheres to the corpus findings of the phrasal verbs frequent in the English language, including the syntactic and semantic structure they exhibit. The methodology adopted is a corpus-based content analysis wherein the findings are compared with their representation in the British National Corpus (BNC). The study demonstrates that the representation is based more on intuition than empirical evidence, and the transitive structure with literal meaning is a more favoured construction. The study suggests that teachers and curriculum designers can employ corpora resources in addition to identify the areas of language teaching that may pose challenges for the learners.

INTRODUCTION

Phrasal verbs present one of the most difficult aspects in English language pedagogy (Gardner and Davies 2007; Garnier and Schmitt 2015). Despite their complexities, they are highly relevant for English as Second Language (ESL) learners, as their knowledge is often associated with proficiency and fluency. Due to their complex syntactic and semantic structures, ESL learners often encounter difficulties at multiple levels, including their lexical, grammatical and semantic complexities in mastering these combinations (Zhang and Kang 2022). In this regard, White (2012) underscores the value of systematically structured instruction in phrasal verbs, highlighting its positive impact on learners' acquisition of these forms. Within corpus linguistics, phrasal verbs have received considerable attention in studies based on general and pedagogic corpora. Despite this growing body of research, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the alignment between learners' actual use of phrasal verbs and the elements to which they

are exposed through pedagogic corpora. To address this issue, the present work employs a corpus-based content analysis approach to analyse the representation of phrasal verbs in an ESL instructional material, focusing on both their syntactic configurations and semantic patterns. A verb and a particle constitute phrasal verbs, where the second element, termed a particle, is derived from an adverbial or prepositional expression. The resultant combinations denote a single indivisible lexical-semantic content and behave like a phrasal expression. Phrasal verbs present a complex structure of English language vocabulary and are problematic for non-native learners. They are assigned various labels such as verb phrases, discontinuous verbs, compound verbs, verb-adverb combinations, and verb-particle construction (VPC) (McArthur et al. 2018). The particle element of the phrasal verbs represents a complex semantic expression, as it can completely change the verb's original meaning or add an extra meaning of direction or completion to the verb. The native speaker's writing and speech present an abundant number of phrasal verbs, particularly in the spoken English discourse. This leads to the point that expressions like 'hang on' instead of 'wait', 'call up' instead of 'telephone', 'put out' instead of 'extinguish', etc, are more in use by native English speakers. On the other hand, non-native English speak-

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ers struggle with the structural and semantic nuances of those expressions, and as a result, avoid using these constructions or control and minimise their expressions according to their level of competence, especially for those items that are not frequently employed. The complexities in operating these expressions arise from their highly polysemous nature and more than one semantic structure, that is, the semantics of the resultant structure may hold little or no association to the semantics of their individual parts.

Owing to the importance of textbooks, it should be taken into consideration by the curriculum developers and textbook writers that the shift from literal to idiomatic constructions of phrasal verbs should be systematic in relation to the cognitive maturity of the ESL learners and their frequency of usage. Equally important is the instantiable frequency of lexical items, as this plays a crucial part in vocabulary acquisition. Frequent exposure to commonly used words enhances learners' fluency and communicative competence by familiarizing them with the core vocabulary of the language. Moreover, given the central role of human cognition in the learning process, repeated encounters with these words facilitate deeper processing and contribute to the consolidation of vocabulary knowledge. Textbook representation of phrasal verbs has been studied by numerous scholars across the world (Shubha 2021; Zamin et al. 2019; Kamarudin and Zamin 2018; Zarifi and Mukundan 2014 among others). However, there seems to be a significant lack of studies examining the representation of phrasal verbs in the Indian ESL textbooks. In this regard, an initial attempt was made by Chauhan et al. (2024) to examine the distribution and uses of phrasal verbs in the grade-1 ESL textbook.

The present study is therefore, not only concerned with the frequency of occurrences of phrasal verbs and the elements like lexical verbs and the particles that constitutes it but also comparing these complex lexical items with the findings of the most frequent items in the British National Corpus (BNC) (Gardner and Davies 2007) with a view to establish whether the ESL learners following the NCERT curriculum, are getting proper exposure to one of the most challenging and specific lexical item of English language, that is, phrasal verbs. Moreover, the study also uncovers whether the representation of phrasal verbs adheres to their instantiation in real language use. The rationale

behind the choice of BNC is that it is considered a standard representation of the British variety of English, and since India, too, was a British colony until 1947, the impact can still be felt in the language used. One of the most basic applications of corpus-linguistics insights is ranking words based on their frequency of occurrence, and comparing those with the frequent items in the general corpus has greater implications for the design and development of any textbook materials.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective is to point out whether the representation of phrasal verbs and their constituents in Indian ESL textbooks for classes 1 to 3 adheres to the corpus-informed findings. The study also attempts to explore their syntactic and semantic structures in the textbooks. The major research questions addressed in this research paper are the following:

1. What is the frequency of occurrences of phrasal verbs in terms of their constituents (lexical verb (LV) and Particles (PRT), found in the target textbook and vice versa?
2. What is the relative rank of these phrasal verbs compared to the 100 most frequent phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus (BNC) (Gardner and Davies 2007)?
3. What are the semantic and syntactic attributes of the phrasal verbs found in the ESL textbooks used in India? What are the implications of these attributes?
4. How can insights from corpus linguistics help to develop and evaluate the ESL textbooks?

Literature Review

Phrasal verbs represent one of the prominent and ubiquitous aspects of the English language. They are prevalent in spoken and written form and are considered a specificity of the English language. Their complex syntactic and semantic structure causes difficulties in their acquisition/learning, comprehension, and production in speech or writing (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999; Cornell 1985). The syntactic classification of phrasal verbs is typically based on two key features: transitivity, which distinguishes between transitive and intransitive forms, and separability, which

differentiates between separable and inseparable constructions. (Bolinger 1971; Fraser 1976; Quirk et al. 1985). The transitive phrasal verbs require an object, as in, “*she took up the carpet*”. In transitive constructions, it is obvious that the verb and particle are separated by the insertion of the nominal element, the direct object and result in a separable construction, as in, “*she took the book down from the top shelf*”. In contrast, in inseparable constructions, the verb and the particle share a close bond and are termed joint configurations of phrasal verbs. Apart from the complex syntactic patterns, phrasal verbs pose complex semantic interpretations. Phrasal verbs are semantically categorized into three types: literal, semi-idiomatic or aspectual, and idiomatic or non-compositional (Dehé 2002). In literal phrasal verbs, the verb and the particle maintain their original meanings, each contributing independently to the overall interpretation of the expression. Based on their semantic transparency, literal phrasal verbs are not stored in the mental lexicon (Jackendoff 2002:75) and are learner-friendly (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999:432). With aspectual or semi-idiomatic constructions, the verb maintains its primary meaning, and particles contribute to its aspectual function, specifying a completion sense and thus denote a completed action. In such cases, the particle often indicates that the action has been completed or brought to an end. By contrast, idiomatic phrasal verbs convey meanings that cannot be directly inferred from the meanings of the component parts in isolation. In these non-compositional constructions, the particle significantly alters the meaning of the verb, resulting in a new, often unpredictable interpretation. With regard to non-compositional semantics of idiomatic phrasal verbs, they must be listed in the mental lexicon as single lexical units (Jackendoff 2002:73).

English phrasal verbs knowledge and comprehension are directly associated with fluency and proficiency, and as a result, they are of utmost importance for ESL learners. Textbooks are the primary source where learners get exposure to these lexical items; therefore, their standard representation in ESL textbooks is imperative. In the recent decade, several studies pertaining to their representation in ESL material have been carried out. In this regard, Shubha (2021) examined the use of phrasal verbs in an ELT textbook for lower secondary schools in Bangladesh, focusing on their pres-

ence and frequency. The study also compared these phrasal verbs with the most commonly used ones in two major English corpora- BNC and COCA (Liu 2011). The results indicate a weak alignment between the textbook content and these corpora, highlighting implications for language teaching. In another study, Zamin et al. (2019) examined phrasal verbs in Malaysian higher secondary school textbooks, comparing those with Biber et al. (1999) list of frequent phrasal verbs. The study found that textbook writers relied more on intuition than on corpus-based research. The study highlights the inadequate representation of phrasal verbs and suggests that, given their syntactic and semantic complexity, these expressions should be selected and presented more deliberately. Subsequently, Kamarudin and Zamin (2018) investigated how commonly recommended language reference books for Malaysian students present the important and widespread feature of phrasal verbs (PVs). They analysed secondary school textbooks and two learner dictionaries, focusing on sections related to selected common PVs. The study found that these resources provide limited and superficial coverage of PVs. Explanations are often unclear, with vague definitions and weak examples. The selection of PVs appears to rely more on the authors’ intuition than on data-driven methods like corpus frequency analysis. In a study by Zarifi and Mukundan (2014), the purpose was to examine the approaches employed in the instruction of phrasal verbs at the secondary level in Malaysian ESL textbooks. Despite the existence of 15 distinct syntactic patterns of these lexical units, they were largely ignored as a distinct phenomenon of language in relation to the grammatical characteristics. Furthermore, it seemed that there was no discernible principle directing the arrangement of various patterns connected with them. This observation reinforces the notion that the creation of ELT textbooks is driven more by intuition rather than empirical evidence. In a similar study on Malaysian ESL textbooks, Zarifi and Mukundan (2012) seek to uncover the use of phrasal verb combinations in the spoken part of the instructional materials. They observed that their representation was inconsistent in relation to natural function in the BNC.

Therefore, it can be concluded from the results of all this previous research on the textbook representation of the phrasal verbs that the curriculum

developers across countries did not consider the possibility of taking the insights of the corpus to develop the textbooks, especially for the phrasal verbs. As a result, the use of phrasal verbs is also not reflected in the writing and spoken English of the ESL learners. This study attempts to bridge this gap by connecting insights of corpus linguistics with English as a second language education in India.

METHODOLOGY

The present study examines the representation of phrasal verbs in the English textbooks of classes 1 to 3 published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), India. Typically, English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks are structured in two parts. The first part introduces vocabulary and grammatical structures within contextual settings, while the second part provides exercises aimed at reinforcing these linguistic elements. In this study, sentences containing English phrasal verbs (EPVs) were meticulously identified across both sections of the textbooks. The identification of EPVs was conducted manually, taking into account their syntactic and semantic complexities. Subsequently, the combinations of the constituent elements of EPVs (that is, the lexical verb and the particle) were also identified, and their respective frequency and percentage of occurrences were measured. A comparison was then carried out at three levels using data from the British National Corpus (BNC). First, the lexical verbs (LVs) forming part of the EPVs in the textbooks were compared with the 20 most frequent lexical verb lemmas occurring in phrasal verb constructions in the BNC, as reported by Gardner and Davies (2007). Second, the particles identified in the phrasal verb constructions within the textbooks were compared with the 16 most frequent particles found in the BNC's phrasal verb constructions (Gardner and Davies 2007).

Furthermore, the EPVs identified in the NCERT textbooks for classes 1 to 3 were categorised based on their syntactic and semantic structure. The theoretical framework guiding this analysis is based on established classifications of phrasal verbs in English, particularly focusing on their syntactic structure and semantic interpretation. The criteria for comparison were drawn from frequency-based studies of phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus, specifically

the frequency rankings of phrasal verb constituents as presented by Gardner and Davies (2007).

RESULTS

The first research question aimed at identifying the total number of occurrences of phrasal verbs in the NCERT classes 1 to 3 English textbooks. First, the researchers manually identified the total number of phrasal verb frequency occurrences separately in the English textbook of each class ranging from classes 1, 2 and 3. Keeping in mind the complex syntactic and semantic structure of phrasal verbs, the identification was carried out manually by the researchers. After extracting all the phrasal verbs from the textbooks, the researchers compared them with the list of 100 most frequent phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus (BNC) (Gardner and Davies 2007) and specified their respective rank in the corpus. Further, the researchers examined those phrasal verbs in terms of their constituent elements (verb and particle) to identify the verb and the particle used in the construction of phrasal verbs. The researchers found a total of 214 instances of phrasal verbs representing the combinations of 54 distinct lexical verb lemmas and 15 particles. The total frequency of occurrences of the phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks is 214. The total frequency in class 1 is 34, class 2 is 112, and class 3 is 68. The abrupt increase in the number of phrasal verb occurrences in class 2 has greater implications in the sense that students will get an ample number of occurrences to get proper exposure to this special lexical category. However, the drastic decrease in the phrasal verb occurrences in class 3 raises the concern. The total number of phrasal verb lemmas, along with their frequency of occurrences across the three classes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of occurrences of phrasal verb lemmas across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks

<i>Class</i>	<i>Phrasal verb lemmas</i>	<i>Frequency of occurrences</i>
Class 1	19	34
Class 2	51	112
Class 3	31	68

Source: Authors

Table 1 clearly shows that the total number of distinct phrasal verbs is 101 across three classes. These 101 phrasal verb lemmas distributed across three classes are compared against their respective rank order in the BNC (Gardner and Davies 2007). There seems to be an uneven distribution of phrasal verbs across the three classes. Generally, the frequency should ascend with classes. However, the researchers found that phrasal verbs in Class 2 are almost 2.6 times more than in Class 1 and 1.6 times more in Class 3.

In Class 1, the cumulative frequency of Phrasal Verbs is 34, consisting of 15 lexical verb lemmas and 10 particles resulting into 19 distinct phrasal verbs. The verb '*look*' is the most frequent lexical verb, appearing 13 times and accounting for 38.2 percent of the total occurrences. The particle '*at*' is the most common, appearing 12 times in combination with the verb '*look*' and accounting for 35.2 percent of all particles identified. Table 2 presents the combination of lexical verbs and the particles used to constitute phrasal verbs in the Class 1 English textbook, together with their frequency and respective rank in the British National Corpus (BNC).

Table 2 clearly depicts that only 9 phrasal verbs in the class 1 textbook find their presence in accordance with the most frequent phrasal verbs outlined in the BNC. However, it is observed that their rank is very low. There is but an exception for one phrasal verb '*go out*' that is in the top 10 phrasal verbs in the BNC. The phrasal verb '*look at*' is presented with the highest number of occurrences in the textbook, and surprisingly, it does not turn up in this list of the target corpus. Only 9 out of the 19 phrasal verbs presented in class 1 align with the

100 most frequent phrasal verbs found in the BNC (which indicates a 47% match with the BNC). '*Go out*' is the only phrasal verb found in the textbook that finds a spot in the top 10 most common PVs in the BNC. This highlights that the phrasal verbs introduced in Class 1 do not correspond to the most frequently occurring phrasal verbs across the various genres of the British National Corpus (BNC). Instead, the phrasal verbs included in the textbook predominantly represent action-oriented meanings, typically linked to motion-related events.

In Class 2, 35 lexical verbs combine with 12 particles, accounting for 51 distinct phrasal verbs to yield 112 tokens of phrasal verbs, which is the highest in the three classes. Lexical verbs like '*look*' and '*go*' combine with 5 particles, followed by '*come*' that combines with 4 particles. '*Out*' and '*at*' are the most frequent particles, with a frequency of 26 and 23, respectively. Table 3 presents the combination of lexical verbs and the particles forming phrasal verbs in the Class 2 English textbook, together with their frequency and respective rank in the British National Corpus (BNC).

The comparison found that out of 51 distinct phrasal verbs in class 2, only 18 phrasal verbs mark their presence in the top 100 PVs in the BNC. Only two phrasal verbs, that is, '*go out*' and '*come back*', find a spot in the top 10 most frequent PVs found in the BNC. This means that only 35 percent matches the target list, and most have a relatively lower rank order in the target corpus. The presentation of phrasal verbs seems to be intuition-based rather than corpus findings.

In Class 3, 19 lexical verbs combine with 12 particles, accounting for 31 distinct phrasal verbs,

Table 2: Phrasal verb occurrences in class 1

S. No.	LV	PRT	Frequency	BNC rank	S. No.	LV	Particle	Frequency	BNC rank
1	Look	At	12	*	8	Get	Up	1	25
		Out	1	48			Into	1	*
2	Come	Along	1	60	9	Walk	Away	2	*
		Down	1	31	10	Go	Out	1	7
3	Fly	Off	2	*	11	Stay	In	1	*
4	Climb	Up	2	*	12	Wake	Up	1	*
5	Hold	Up	1	50	13	Run	Away	1	*
		On	1	74	14	Take	Out	1	30
6	Put	In	2	78	15	Grow	Into	1	*
7	Act	Out	1	*					

* Indicates the absence of the phrasal verbs in the target corpus

Source: Authors

Table 3: Phrasal verb occurrences in class 2

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>LV</i>	<i>PRT</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>	<i>S. No.</i>	<i>LV</i>	<i>Particle</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>
1	Look	At	22	*	12	Wake	Up	2	*
		Up	1	26	13	Pull	In	2	*
		Down	1	39	14	Take	Off	3	42
		For	1	*			Out	1	30
		Into	1	*	15	Act	Out	3	*
2	Come	Back	4	6	16	Keep	On	1	*
		In	1	15	17	Frighten	Away	1	*
		Down	2	31	18	Sort	Out	1	*
		Along	1	60	19	Set	Off	1	46
3	Go	On	3	1	20	Grow	Up	1	*
		Out	5	7	21	Rub	Out	1	*
		Away	2	*	22	Roll	Out	1	*
		Up	1	28	23	Move	Over	1	*
		Down	1	16	24	Turn	Back	1	56
4	Blow	Down	7	*	25	Climb	Down	1	*
		Away	1	*	26	Try	Out	1	*
		Over	1	*	27	Cut	Out	1	*
5	Get	Into	1	*	28	Cross	Out	1	*
		Off	6	66	29	Dry	Up	1	*
6	Give	Up	2	24	30	Put	Away	1	*
7	Sweep	Away	3	*	31	Peep	In	1	*
8	Cry	Out	2	*	32	Make	Up	1	11
9	Call	Out	5	*	33	Pick	Up	1	4
10	Run	Away	2	*	34	Laugh	At	1	*
		Out	2	*	35	Fall	Down	1	*
11	Eat	Up	2	*					

* Indicates the absence of the phrasal verbs in the target corpus

Source: Authors

to yield 68 instances of phrasal verbs. The lexical verb ‘go’ combines with 5 particles (*into*, *back*, *by*, *up*, and *on*), followed by ‘look’, which combines with 4 particles (*at*, *after*, *up*, and *down*). ‘Look at’ is the most frequent phrasal verb, followed by ‘pull up’ with a frequency of 17 and 7, respectively. ‘Up’ and ‘at’ are the most frequent particles found, with a frequency of 23 and 17, respectively. Table 4 presents the combination of lexical verbs and the particles constituting phrasal verbs in the Class 3 English textbook, together with their frequency and respective rank in the British National Corpus (BNC).

The comparison shows that out of 31 distinct phrasal verbs in class 3, only 12 found a spot in the 100 most common phrasal verbs in the BNC (which is a 39% match with the BNC). The matching phrasal verbs have a comparatively lower rank order in the BNC. The phrasal verbs do not highlight the top-order phrasal verbs in the BNC.

The frequency count of the total occurrences of phrasal verbs in the textbook from classes 1 to 3

reveals that out of 101 distinct phrasal verbs, only 15 have a frequency greater than 2. Table 5 compares the 15 most frequent phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks against their rank in the BNC (the ranking in the BNC was provided by Gardner and Davies 2007).

The 15 most frequent phrasal verbs represent 59 percent of the total occurrences of phrasal verbs in the textbook. The phrasal verb ‘look at’ is the most frequent across the three classes. Surprisingly, if one looks at the second most frequent phrasal verb ‘wake up’ there is a huge frequency gap. Out of these 15 PVs, 10 of the PVs found in the textbooks are absent in the BNC, indicating that the most common phrasal verbs used in British English are not represented in the textbooks. It is also noteworthy that the most frequent phrasal verb in the textbook ‘look at’ does not appear in the 100 most prevalent phrasal verbs in the BNC. Only three phrasal verbs in the textbooks, that is, ‘go on’, ‘come back’, and ‘go out’ are in the top 10 list of most common phrasal verbs in the BNC. The

Table 4: Phrasal verb occurrences in class 3

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>LV</i>	<i>PRT</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>	<i>S. No.</i>	<i>LV</i>	<i>Particle</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>
1	Look	At	17	*	10	Go	Into	1	*
		After	2	*			Back	1	5
		Down	1	39			By	3	*
		Up	1	26			Up	1	28
2	Wake	Up	6	*			On	1	1
3	Come	Back	3	6	11	Think	About	1	*
		Out	2	13	12	Call	Out	1	*
4	Grow	Up	3	*	13	Pick	Up	3	4
		Into	1	*	14	Slip	Back	1	*
5	Pull	Out	1	*			Away	1	*
		Up	7	*	15	Watch	Out	1	*
6	Act	Out	1	*	16	Move	On	1	55
7	Get	On	1	35	17	Take	Off	1	42
		Into	1	*	18	Dress	Up	1	*
8	Put	On	1	53	19	Draw	Up	1	*
9	Cut	Out	1	*					

* Indicates the absence of the phrasal verbs in the target corpus

Source: Authors

Table 5: Frequent phrasal verbs in textbooks and their respective rank in the BNC

<i>Textbook rank</i>	<i>Phrasal verbs</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>
1	Look at	51	*
2	Wake up	9	*
3	Come back	7	6
4	Blow down	7	*
5	Pull up	7	*
6	Go out	6	7
7	Get off	6	66
8	Call out	6	*
9	Act out	5	*
10	Go on	4	1
11	Grow up	4	*
12	Put up	4	*
13	Take off	4	42
14	Get into	3	*
15	Sweep away	3	*

Source: Authors

remaining two phrasal verbs found in the textbooks, that is, 'take off' and 'get off', occupy the 42nd and 66th positions, respectively.

Further, the researchers present the frequency of constituents of phrasal verbs (lexical verbs and particles) and compare them against the 20 most frequent lexical verbs and 16 most frequent particles in the BNC (Gardner and Davies 2007). In the Tables 6, 7 and 8 presented, the researchers will delve into the mostly encountered lexical verbs and particles in the NCERT English textbooks (for Classes 1, 2 and 3) and compare them with their rank in the British National Corpus.

Table 6: 10 most frequent lexical verbs across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks

<i>Textbook rank</i>	<i>Lexical verb</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>
1	Look	60	9
2	Go	20	1
3	Come	15	2
4	Get	11	4
5	Pull	10	*
6	Wake	9	*
7	Call	6	*
8	Take	6	3
9	Grow	6	*
10	Act	5	*

Source: Authors

Table 6 shows the 10 most frequent lexical verbs that take part in phrasal verb construction in the given NCERT ESL textbooks. There seems to be a notable difference in the frequency of the most frequent LV 'look' and other LVs. The lexical verb 'go' combines with the greatest number of particles (8), namely, 'out', 'on', 'away', 'up', 'down', 'into', 'back' and 'by', followed by 'look', which combines with 7 particles like 'at', 'into', 'at', 'up', 'down', 'for', and 'after'. Five of the lexical verbs (that is 50 %) find a spot in the list of most frequent LVs in the BNC, while five of them do not.

Further, the researchers present the frequency of occurrences of all the particles used in phrasal verb constructions across class 1 to 3 in Table 7.

Table 7: Distribution of particles across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Particle</i>	<i>Class 1</i>	<i>Class 2</i>	<i>Class 3</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	At	12	23	17	52
2	Up	5	12	23	40
3	Out	4	26	7	37
4	Down	1	13	1	15
5	Away	3	10	1	14
6	Off	2	10	1	13
7	Back	0	5	5	10
8	On	1	4	4	9
9	Into	2	2	3	7
10	In	3	4	0	7
11	By	0	0	3	3
12	After	0	0	2	2
13	Along	1	1	0	2
14	Over	0	2	0	2
15	About	0	0	1	1
	Total	34	112	68	214

Source: Authors

Table 7 clearly depicts that ten particles have been introduced in the Class 1 textbook. Two new particles ‘back’ and ‘over’ have been introduced in Class 2 and three new particles namely, ‘by’, ‘after’ and ‘about’ are introduced in Class 3. The particle ‘at’ is the most frequent across the three classes accounting for 24.3 percent of the total particles found in the target textbooks. The top five particles, that is, ‘at’, ‘up’, ‘out’, ‘down’, and ‘away’ account for 73.8 percent of the total particle occurrences. Here, in Table 8 the researchers will illustrate the comparison between the particles found in the textbook with that found in the BNC. Further, the comparison of the phrasal verb particles in the textbook against the frequent particles in BNC is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Comparison of ranks of particles in the NCERT English textbooks and the BNC

<i>Textbook rank</i>	<i>Particles</i>	<i>BNC rank</i>
1	At	*
2	Up	1
3	Out	2
4	Down	4
5	Away	*
6	Off	6
7	Back	*
8	On	5
9	Into	*
10	In	7

Source: Authors

As is evident from Table 8 the four particles (at, back, into and away) that are present in the

textbook in the top 10 particles list do not align with the ranking order in the BNC. 60 percent of the particles found in the NCERT textbooks align with the particles found in the BNC.

The comparison of these phrasal verbs with the most frequently occurring ones in the British National Corpus (BNC) indicates a notable disparity in their frequency distribution between the target textbooks and the selected corpus. Only five phrasal verbs, that is, ‘go on’, ‘come back’, ‘go out’, ‘take off’ and ‘get off’, find a spot in the BNC corpus at the 1st, 6th, 7th, 42nd and 66th positions, respectively. Other phrasal verbs do not find a spot in the 100 most common phrasal verbs in the BNC. This highlights that the selection of phrasal verbs in the target textbooks does not align with corpus-based evidence and current research in language pedagogy.

Another important aspect of the paper is to examine the syntactic and semantic structure of phrasal verbs observed in classes 1 to 3. The syntactic categorisation includes the identification of the transitive and intransitive constructions. The transitive constructions are further categorised based on their split (for example, ‘put the light on’) and joint (for example, ‘put on the light’) configuration. In Table 9, the researchers present the syntactic structure of the phrasal verbs encountered in the target NCERT ESL textbooks across three classes.

Table 9 clearly shows that keeping in mind the early ESL learners level of cognitive maturity and

Table 9: Syntactic distribution of phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks

S. No.	Syntactic categories		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
1	Transitive	Split	0	18	3
		Joint	26	63	44
2	Intransitive		8	31	21

Source: Authors

the complexities associated with the split configuration of phrasal verbs, split configurations are not present in the class 1 ESL textbook. The textbook developers started a split configuration of phrasal verbs from class 2. However, the slight decrease in the split configuration in class 3 raises the concern. The study observed that 28 percent of the phrasal verbs found across the three classes are intransitive in nature. Out of the 72 percent of the transitive constructions, 86 percent of them are in joint configuration while the remaining 14 percent are in split configuration. Tables 10 and 11 present the percentage distribution of phrasal verbs across three classes based on transitivity and separability features to elucidate the fact.

Tables 10 and 11 clearly depict that the transitive structures are more favoured over the intransitive and the joint configuration of phrasal verbs is more favoured over the split configuration of phrasal verbs.

Table 10: Distribution of transitive and intransitive phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT textbooks

S. No.	Phrasal verb constructions	Percentage
1	Transitive constructions	72
2	Intransitive constructions	28

Source: Authors

Table 11: Distribution of split and joint phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT textbooks

S. No.	Phrasal verb configurations	Percentage
1	Joint configuration	86
2	Split configuration	14

Source: Authors

Further, the researchers categorise phrasal verb occurrences based on their semantic categories of literal, aspectual and idiomatic phrasal verbs. Ta-

ble 12 presents the semantic categories of phrasal verbs in the target textbooks across the three classes.

Table 12: Semantic distribution of phrasal verbs across the three classes in the NCERT English textbooks

S. No.	Semantic categories	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
1.	Literal	26	106	62
2.	Aspectual	0	3	1
3.	Idiomatic	8	3	5

Source: Authors

Table 12 clearly shows the omnipresence of literal phrasal verbs, whereas aspectual and idiomatic phrasal verbs mark very low presence. In class 1, only the literal and idiomatic phrasal verbs are presented, whereas aspectual phrasal verbs are completely lacking. This raises the concern that before exposing learners to the compositional phrasal verbs (literal and aspectual) the idiomatic constructions are introduced. The distribution of all the semantic classes of phrasal verbs is uneven. However, the highest number of literal constructions matches the early ESL learners' level of cognitive maturity.

Further, the cumulative percentage of the semantic types of phrasal verb occurrences in all three classes has been calculated and presented in Table 13.

Table 13: Distribution of semantic classes of phrasal verbs across three classes of NCERT English textbooks

S. No.	Semantic categories	Percentage
1	Literal	91
2	Aspectual	2
3	Idiomatic	7

Source: Authors

Table 13 clearly depicts the predominance of literal phrasal verbs (91%) over aspectual (2%) and idiomatic (7%) phrasal verbs. As discussed earlier, literal phrasal verbs carry meaning that can be deciphered from the meanings of their individual constituents. Therefore, they do not need to be stored in the mental lexicon as a separate entity. This is, however, not the case with idiomatic phrasal verbs. Since the overall meaning has nothing to do with

the meaning of its individual elements, they are required to be stored as a separate lexical entity in their mind, which makes it difficult for the learners.

DISCUSSION

The examination of the total number of occurrences of phrasal verbs in the NCERT classes 1 to 3 English textbooks resulted in a total of 214 instances of phrasal verbs representing the combinations of 54 distinct lexical verb lemmas and 15 particles. The total frequency in class 1 is 34, class 2 is 112, and class 3 is 68. As evidenced in Table 1, the total number of distinct phrasal verbs in class 1 is 19, class 2 is 51, and class 3 is 31. The abrupt increase in the number of phrasal verb occurrences in class 2 has greater implications in the sense that students will get an ample number of occurrences to get proper exposure to this special lexical category. However, the drastic decrease in the phrasal verb occurrences in class 3 raises the concern. A subsequent comparison of the phrasal verbs identified in the textbooks with the most frequently occurring phrasal verbs in the British National Corpus (BNC) as documented by Gardner and Davies (2007) reveals a marked disparity in frequency distribution. Specifically, the analysis shows that only 9 phrasal verbs from Class 1, 18 from Class 2, and 12 from Class 3 of the textbook appear in the BNC's list of most frequent phrasal verbs. Moreover, with the exception of a few that rank among the top 10, the majority of these verbs occupy relatively low positions on the frequency list. Out of the 15 most frequent phrasal verbs in the textbook, only 3 find a spot in the top 10 phrasal verbs in the BNC. This highlights that the selection of phrasal verbs in the target textbooks does not align with corpus-based evidence and current research in language pedagogy. In a recent study, Chauhan et al. (2024) assert that corpus-informed findings offer valuable insights for curriculum developers in the selection of appropriate vocabulary for textbooks, particularly complex lexical items, such as phrasal verbs, when designing the textbooks. Similarly, Liu et al. (2024) observe that despite advancements in corpus linguistic studies, existing textbooks still exhibit significant linguistic discrepancies in their representation.

The diverse syntactic and semantic structures of phrasal verbs in the target textbooks reveal that the majority of occurrences allow transitive pat-

terns (accounting for 72% of total instances). However, certain instances of intransitive constructions are also observed, and they account for 28 percent of the total occurrences. As evidenced by Table 13 presented, one can see the prevalence of literal phrasal verbs (91%) over aspectual (2%) and idiomatic (7%) ones. The prevalence of literal phrasal verbs over aspectual and idiomatic forms suggests that semantic intricacies have been adequately addressed in their representation within textbooks, as evidenced by Van Fossan (2022), who emphasised the need for an early exposure to literal phrasal verbs for early learners. Somathasan (2024) asserts that learning phrasal verbs may be challenging for many students since most of them are idiomatic, meaning that students can scarcely understand them from the meaning of their constituent components. However, the dominance of idiomatic phrasal verbs over aspectual phrasal verbs requires attention. The researchers, therefore, signify that introduction of aspectual phrasal verbs should be done prior to idiomatic phrasal verbs, as depending upon the complexities, the aspectual phrasal verbs are partially compositional where verb maintains its primary meaning while the particle represent aspectual information such as completion, inception or progression of the action denoted by the verb. It is worth noticing that while designing the textbooks, the cognitive complexities have been taken care of. The predominance of transitive constructions over intransitive constructions and the literal phrasal verbs over aspectual and idiomatic phrasal verbs validates the stance.

The present study noticed that the distribution of phrasal verbs across the three classes of the NCERT ESL textbooks was uneven and merely based on intuition. This could indicate that the choice relied more on intuition than corpus-informed findings. Corpus-driven insights prove to be significant in designing and developing educational material. Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) point out that learners prefer to be quite selective in learning, focusing their learning time on elements that are frequent in language use and are relevant and meaningful. Additionally, the integration of corpus-informed insights in selecting lexical or phraseological units, as put forward by several authors (Chauhan et al. 2024; Liu 2011; Gardner and Davies 2007; Grant 2005; Simpson and Mendis 2003; Minugh 2002), tend to be more authentic, particularly when it comes to the objectivity of the result-

ing selection. In a study, Shubha (2021) recognises that the implementation of corpus-informed findings of frequent phrasal verbs in the ESL/EFL textbooks can certainly enhance the learner's comprehension. In another study, Koprowski (2005) expressed discontent over the lack of uniformity among textbooks, noting that English Language Teaching (ELT) materials developers do not follow structured criteria to select lexical items termed phrasal verbs. They rely more on their intuition and experience. Similarly, McPartland (1983: 155) emphasises that the regular practice of phrasal verbs in linguistic input tends to accelerate the language acquisition process, irrespective of the intricacies of structure and meaning. Studies like these hold great potential since instructional materials are crucial in language instruction. The language input in textbooks is a probable factor contributing to the challenges faced by ESL learners in acquiring complex language elements like phrasal verbs. The present work is among the first of its kind in the Indian context, which integrates corpus-informed findings for the representation of phrasal verbs in ESL textbooks. The study also investigates their syntactic and semantic structures based on the level of complexity. Integrating these insights into the design and development of ESL textbooks will enhance the representation of these lexical items in the instructional material. Phrasal verbs provide communication with more depth and adaptability, making them crucial for learning English. They improve the naturalness, accuracy, and interest of writing and speech, making them more like native use. As Khojasteh and Mukundan (2025) detail in their paper that students may have difficulties with comprehension, fluency, and pragmatic ability in real-world situations if textbooks do not correspond with authentic language usage.

Despite the fact that they might be difficult because of their idiomaticity and various meanings, being proficient in them improves fluency and understanding. They are essential because of their widespread usage in academic work, corporate English, and routine discussions (Azizli 2025).

CONCLUSION

The paper highlights the representation of phrasal verbs, one of the special categories of English language vocabulary learning, in the NCERT

ESL textbooks of classes 1 to 3. The findings indicate that the selection and inclusion of phrasal verbs in these textbooks appear to be guided more by the writers' intuition and subjective judgment than by insights derived from corpus-based research. A significant discrepancy was observed between the phrasal verbs presented in the textbooks and those most frequently occurring in the British National Corpus (BNC). Specifically, the textbooks fail to reflect the most commonly used phrasal verbs across a variety of genres as documented in the BNC. Corpora offer valuable support to educators and material developers by enabling them to critically assess and reorganise curricular content to ensure that instructional materials incorporate both high-frequency items and linguistic forms that are typically challenging for learners. It is therefore recommended that future textbook development be informed by authentic language usage patterns evidenced in corpus data. One illustrative recommendation is the inclusion and systematic teaching of the 100 most frequently used phrasal verbs, especially at the early stages of language instruction. Given their high frequency and pedagogical relevance, these lexical items should be prioritised for explicit instruction and integrated meaningfully into classroom practice. The findings of this study underscore the need for continued research in the domain of ESL instruction. A promising direction for future investigation would be a comparative analysis of a range of ESL teaching materials against general language corpora to evaluate their alignment with authentic language use. Additionally, comparing ESL textbooks with learner corpora could yield valuable insights into the effectiveness of instructional content and its impact on language acquisition. Such research holds considerable potential for informing pedagogical strategies and addressing challenges faced by ESL learners, particularly in acquiring complex linguistic features such as phrasal verbs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' exposure to vocabulary is very critical at this foundational stage, and therefore, it is important to critically evaluate the textbooks to gain insights into the vocabulary they are being exposed to. To have better exposure to complex lexical items like phrasal verbs, the curriculum plan-

ners and developers can consult the available frequency lists of these items. On the other hand, teachers should also be aware of the most frequent phrasal verbs and should, therefore, design exercises to compensate for the shortcomings of the textbooks. This would help the learners enhance their proficiency and command of the language.

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