

Learning Prepositions as Part of Fixed Phrases in Phrasal Verbs and Collocations: The Case of “On” in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Phrasal verbs are a category of multiword units that are used in everyday English. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students wanting to improve their communication skills, the study of multiword units can be frustrating, interesting, and when understood and mastered, a great confidence builder. A multiword unit (MWU) is a string of words that are considered semantically and syntactically inseparable, and thus become a unit of words that together has a unique meaning. Accordingly, phrasal verbs are a type of MWU consisting of a verb that is followed by an adverb or a preposition. EFL students often make errors grammatically when placing, or omitting, the correct preposition or adverb with verb to form a suitable phrasal verb. This study was conducted to determine what type of input could more effectively reinforce learners' familiarity with the proper combination of verbs and prepositions. For this comparative study, a sample of eighty-eight freshmen, from the same university in southern Taiwan participated. In the first phase, all were administered a pretest of twenty phrasal verb questions. Afterward, one group was provided with extensive reading material and the other group a corpora/concordance printout with distinct examples and texts. Each was given less than forty minutes to finish studying the material. This was followed up with a posttest with the same questions as the pretest. A statistical analysis calculating the difference between pretest and posttest for each group and between the two groups was performed. A review of the findings determined that quantity does not equal quality, and that studying a large quantity of reading material, doesn't ensure increased competency when learning phrasal verbs.

And while the role of extensive reading shouldn't be ignored for long term learning, the mastering of phrasal verbs requires patience, diligence, and consistency.

I. INTRODUCTION

In EFL learners, prepositions usually play a less important role than the content words such as verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbials. As prepositions are one type of function words, their major function is to show the grammatical and structural relations between linguistic elements (Kao, 2004). Learners spend more time on content words in order to build up most of the sentence fragment, and to increase their

One category of relational prepositions is spatial prepositions, which are commonly used to describe space or direction. The prepositions *on*, *at*, *in* are examples. When prepositions become part of fixed phrases in phrasal verbs or collocations by combining them with main verbs, EFL students routinely misinterpret the phrase due to unfamiliarity. Overall, such a misunderstanding and wrong use of prepositions in phrasal verbs or collocations might lead to reduce, omit, or apply incorrect grammar on the production. Prepositions in the aspect are no longer like the free prepositions with limited functions indicating spatial concept.

In order to raise EFL learners' awareness in multiword units, in particular, phrasal verbs, and to enhance their accuracy and fluency in perceiving and producing phrasal verbs and collocations, the researcher asked research question: Which is a more effective EFL phrasal verbs or collocations learning method; (1) a corpus/concordance data-driven learning printout, or (2) reading phrasal verbs/collocations in context.

The next section of the research—literature review will be divided into 4 subsections: firstly to introduce the feature of multiword units (MWUs) and the control of them will result in significant proficiency of language as how native speakers do; secondly

to elaborate on one unit of MWU—phrasal verbs and the difficulty for EFL learners to master them; thirdly to pinpoint the function of prepositions in phrasal verbs and collocations and how it constructs the fundamental concept of the experiment; finally to mainly present the importance of input with context for learners to acquire phrasal verbs and relative research of the two types of input in language learning. Later, the third section includes the description of the experiment design. Aside from those, the result of experiment for the purpose of responding the research question, the pedagogical implication and conclusion will be demonstrated respectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

II. 1 Multiword Units

A multiword unit is a vocabulary item which consists of a sequence of two or more words, and the sequence of words semantically and/or syntactically forms a meaningful and inseparable unit (Moon, 1997) or, one single unit consists of a string of words with a single meaning (Schmitt, 2000). A skillful speaker who can encode a whole unit at a time achieves great fluency in their language knowledge (Pawley and Syder, 1983).

Moon (1997) suggests that three criteria help define multiword units more precisely: institutionalization, fixedness, and non-compositionality.

When a multiword unit is conventionalized in a speech community, people can recognize it as a unit that reoccurs regularly, with the same meaning, and with a unique definition. It is conventionalized because it is consistently used by language speakers and fixed to various degrees. For example, idioms, which are one type of multiword unit, tend to be the least flexible in interpretation. For example “kick the bucket”. The idiom could be modified with an adjective “kick the big bucket” or created as a colloquial derivative for dying—“kick off”. If an idiom is

institutionalized, people know its basic form well, which allows imaginative speakers to create interesting variations. Such flexibility provides idioms with a relatively great degree of understanding without being rigid. With regard to non-compositionality, it refers to the degree to which a multiword unit can not be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, for example, it is hard to distract the meaning by looking at the literal meaning from the three individual words “kick-the-bucket”.

Based on the introduction of the three characteristics, we would easily accept the fact that multiword units are the result of lexical and semantic processes of fossilization and word-formation, rather than the results of the operation of grammatical rules. The non-compositionality of multiword items, one of the three criteria mentioned above, whether syntactic, semantic or pragmatic in nature, means that they must be recognized, learned, decoded and encoded as holistic units (Moon, 1997).

II. 2 Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are constructed with the combinations of verbs and adverbial or prepositional particles. Phrasal verbs and idioms are both cases where a string of words can correspond to a single semantic unit (Saeed, 2000). Such a semantically meaningful and syntactically inseparable idiosyncrasy contributes to phrasal verbs identified as one category of multiword units. As a matter of fact, Moon (1997) described several different types of multiword items: compounds, phrasal verbs, idioms, fixed phrases, and prefabs. Multiword verbs are termed to describe the large number of English verbs consisting two, or sometimes three parts: (1) a base verb and preposition such as “look into”, (2) a base verb and adverbial particle, that is a phrasal verb such as “break down” and (3) the combination of a base verb, adverbial particle and preposition such as “put up with” (Gairns & Redman, 1986). Therefore,

multiword verbs can be interpreted as another terminology for phrasal verbs.

Under the current teaching conditions, learning phrasal verbs has been acknowledged as a formidable barrier for EFL students' efforts to achieve fluency. Therefore, seldom are they mastered. The nature of Phrasal verbs, when parsed, can be difficult at best to comprehend, because their meaning is uninterpretable due to the idiomaticity which makes phrasal verbs a particular problem (Schmitt, 2000). It is unclear how their meanings are produced: the verb usually has a very broad meaning and it is difficult to attach a specific interpretation to their particles of prepositions (Verstraten, 1992)

Wyss (2002) divided the problem that EFL learners could have in phrasal verbs into 4 categories as below:

1. A phrasal verb may be understood simply from the sum of their parts, but the meaning could be opaque as well.
2. The particle could be related to direction, while it could be possibly not related to direction.
3. A student can be confused by the prepositional or adverbial function of the same particle.
4. Learners would be depressed by not ever mastering on a great number of phrasal verbs in modern English.

II. 3 Prepositions and Collocations

When EFL learners meet with difficulty to comprehend phrasal verbs and complications based on the 4 possible reasons noted previously in EFL learning, it might cause them to avoid using them altogether. This presents a difficult dilemma, because fluency using lexical chunks, the same as what we recognize the multiword units, allows native speakers to be fluent (Schmidt, 2000).

According to Longman dictionary of Contemporary English, prepositions are often a part of fixed phrases for phrasal verbs, collocations and idioms. The prepositional/adverbial particles as the first and second categories, are mainly discusses in the research out of the three types of multiword verbs that Gairns & Redman indicated should be consequently learned as a part of fixed phrases. They are termed bound prepositions as the ones used together with verbs (Kao, 2004). More specifically, they are one category out the three major types of prepositions: Free prepositions, bound prepositions and complex prepositions. The preposition “on” with which the phrasal verbs are associated in the research is involved in the second category--bound prepositions, which are the ones used together with verbs.

If a phrasal verb can be learned and recognized in a holistic context, predictability assists people in finding the appropriate collocates, even if part of the unit is missing. Could phrasal verbs possibly be relative to collocations? There are basically two types of collocations: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations consist of a content word (verb, noun or adjective) and a grammatical word such as a preposition or certain structural patterns; lexical collocations contain no subordinate element in combination, for example, verb-noun collocations (Schmidt, 2000).

Phrasal verbs are one type of grammatical collocations, and collocation is exactly the core concept of the research and the experiment design. The researcher designs the experiment by planning to ask EFL learners to judge and find a correct prepositional collocate from potential prepositions to complete a phrasal verb inside a complete sentence. In addition, the researcher aimed at observe the errors that EFL learners frequently make, such as wrong choice, insertion or omission of prepositions (Eliza, 2004). Therefore, all the answers listed for each questions (Appendix I) for subjects to make the decision are utilized with purpose.

The preposition “on” can add a sense of continuation to the main verb for a unit of phrasal verb and function as a prepositional or adverbial particle. “On” is also a preposition which indicates a spatial sense, such as covering or forming part of a surface. Consequently, the ambiguity of the preposition in its function and meaning assists in justifying to the second reason Wyss lists when explaining the difficulties EFL learners have mastering phrasal verbs.

II. 4 Language Input with Context

How can EFL learners best acquire the knowledge to better understand phrasal verbs in context versus a grouping of puzzling grammatical fragments? Phrasal verbs are so arbitrary that no one has yet been able to offer a truly satisfactory way of teaching them (Schmidt, 2000). As collocation is previously discussed in recognizing phrasal verbs as a holistic unit, such a combination of main verbs and their prepositional or adverbial particles requires collocation knowledge. Input, however, is certainly the major source of learners’ collocation knowledge (Wible, 2005)

Increasing learners’ exposure to written language has been proved to enhance their language proficiency. Even though learning from contexts is more difficult in a second language, second language readers have been shown to gain significant word knowledge from reading (Nagy, 1997). Moreover, it is not possible to achieve proficiency in the target language without exposure to the language in actual instances being used for communicative purposes (Wible, 2005)

One practical solution suggested to teach multiword verbs to intermediate-to-advanced level students lies in having learners deduce the meanings of phrasal verbs as they appear in reading passages (Wyss, 2002). This presents an alternative approach that EFL/ESL teachers can adopt by providing learners comprehensible inputs with contexts to achieve the goals effectively.

The written reading passages provide us abundant context in learning a foreign language. We shall learn the use of language by the way of frequent exposure and extensive reading, but is it the uniquely effective approach to learn and recognize phrasal verbs? In the rapidly developed circumstance with technology, the extensive association with computers has certainly brought an innovative approach to language learning.

The rise of corpora which contains authentic texts collected from different resources of the target language draws SL/FL learners' attention to concordance tools. Users are required to key in the keyword to conduct a corpus research, and all the relative authentic texts will be retrieved and listed in order based on their occurring frequency in the corpus. Data-driven Learning (DDL) finally becomes a trend in second language learning, because it increases learners' independence and awareness by combining corpus data and concordance tools (Wible, 2005). Furthermore, DDL influences not only how a foreign language is taught, but also what is taught (Johns, 1994).

Rod Ellis (1992) has promoted giving students language data and letting them derive the underlying grammatical rules in an inductive learning approach. Students can be provided key words to learn and find their meanings and behavior in context by looking at several concordance examples.

Johns (1994) claimed that DDL should be suitable for intermediate and advanced learners, and Hadley (n. d.) proved the question remained unanswered that DDL can be adapted for EFL beginners or near-beginners.

It is worthwhile to compare the learning effect between the discrete context offered by the challenging technology—the corpus with the abundant context to which we are used to exposed in EFL learning. The interest in exploring the difference in learning efficiency between reading and Data-driving Learning forms the

fundamental structure of the experiment in the research.

III. METHOD

III. 1 Subjects

The subjects are two groups of non-English-majored freshmen rated as pre-intermediate learners at a university in the southern Taiwan. Their proficiency in English was examined and categorized based on the scores of the subject—English from the Joint Entrance Exam of College the subject took after graduating from high schools.

As the experiment aims at testing whether abundant input such as reading materials or discrete input such as what could be found from corpora or concordances are more effectively enhance the learning effect for EFL learners, two groups of learners will be exposed to either of the two different input with a collection including at least the ten target phrasal verbs.

50 students of group A will be provided with 10 on-line stories and news involving 10 target phrasal verbs in the reading passages. With regard to 38 students of class B, they will be treated with concordance printout version from <http://llrc.eng.ntnu.edu.tw/English/search/> and texts from the well-know British National Corpus (BNC) and Collocation Explorer of iWill <http://research.iwillnow.org/project/bncrce/>. The printout version of concordance and corpus includes 10 phrasal verbs associated with the preposition “on” and 5 with different prepositions to distract the subjects. On the other hand,

III. 2 Procedure

It would be extremely time-consuming if the data were collected from the production of the subjects in using the ten target phrasal verbs associated with “on”.

The experiment will be conducted based on the purpose below. Firstly, the researcher intends to simply observe whether the subjects' understanding of the unique prepositional/adverbial particle "on" for different phrasal verbs is consistent. Secondly, learners often omit the existence of prepositions due to overpaying attention to the meaning of verbs in their production of phrasal verbs; therefore, the researcher expects to enhance their recognition of associating the two components of phrasal verbs as a whole. Thirdly, the researcher infers the applicability to EFL learning in the experiment with the suggestion inspired by Gairns and Redman (1986), who suggested to group multiword verbs for teaching purpose.

First of all, all the subjects need to take the pretest (Appendix A) consisting of 20 shorten sentences adopted from corpora: 10 target phrasal verbs which associated with the unique target preposition "on", and 10 with even number including the prepositions "at" "in" "up" "to" are involved to distract their attention from focusing on the single preposition. Furthermore, the subjects are instructed to circle an appropriate preposition from six possible answers.

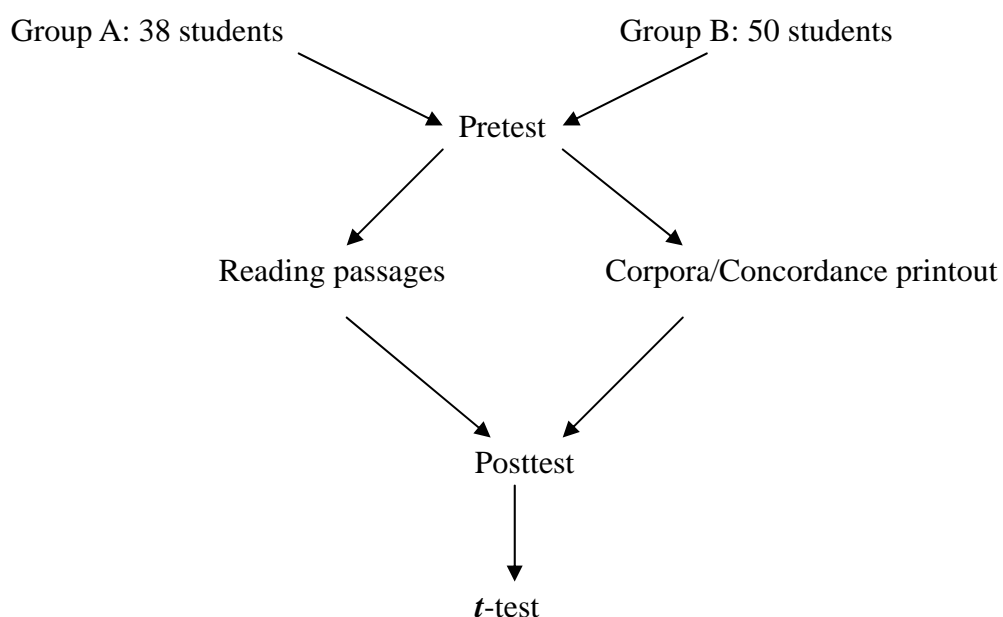
After finishing the pretest, the subjects are provided with two different sources of input after finishing the pretest: Abundant input from reading and discrete input from corpora and concordance. The reading contents for Group A are considerably more than the other group; those are all short stories or news chosen online by the researcher. The students of group B are introduced how to get access to corpora at a computer classroom first of all. They are asked to read a handout version including examples not only of complete sentences from BNC and iWill, but also of incomplete sentences from concordance in class.

Moreover, the subjects are not allowed to look up the dictionary or discuss with classmates when they are requested to finish reading the handouts. Therefore, they need to observe the examples and finish reading passages and finally regulate the

usage of verbs on their own. As a matter of fact, all students haven't got a clear instruction from the researcher and they are not informed with the purpose of testing phrasal verbs. They are exclusively requested to read through the whole passages by drawing a vertical line on the right of chunks in which they are instructed when they took a breath while reading, regardless of the contents that they are provided and asked to finish reading are discrete or abundant. The purpose of implementing such as instruction is to prevent the result from being influenced by dictionaries or over-focusing on the target phrasal verbs.

An immediate posttest is implemented after the two groups finish reading the resource either from corpora/concordance or reading passages with the same form they are tested for the pretest (Appendix A). In addition, only the ten target phrasal verbs with "on" are items for grading. In order to demonstrate the differences in learning effect and between the two groups, between the pretest and posttest for each group with different input, the researcher will discuss them with the statistics via t-test in the following section. The procedure of experiment is briefly described as figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Procedure of Experiment



IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The performance of group B with corpora/concordance printout is significantly better than group B, though the printout version of corpora/concordance comprises the texts of five irrelevant items as distraction and the reading materials contains exactly the 10 target phrasal verbs. The difficulty that group A may encounter is the large volume of reading context they have to finish. Furthermore, it could overwhelm the subjects of group A without explicit instruction of asking them to focus on phrasal verbs. On the contrary, group B could easily perceive and acquire the common collocates with which the main verbs associate by simply concentrating on the texts of corpora or concordance, even without clear instruction from the researcher.

We could learn that the degree in improving the correct association of prepositions and main verbs for both groups are significant based on the half of Sig. (2-tailed), that is P value is smaller than 0.05 from Table 1 and 2, the result of paired samples test discussing the difference in the posttest and pretest for group A and B respectively . Group B is much more significant in raising their degree of judging because their P value is even smaller than group A's.

Table 1 Paired Samples Test: Group A

Posttest-Pretest	Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	3.40000	14.22989	2.01241	1.68952	49	0.09747

Note: (P value=Sig (2-tailed)/2, the result is significant when P<0.05)

Table 2 Paired Samples Test: Group B

Posttest-Pretest	Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	10.52632	18.88047	3.06282	3.43681	37	0.00147

Note: (P value=Sig (2-tailed)/2, the result is significant when P<0.05)

The difference in recognizing the target phrasal verbs with correctness exists by observing means on the pretest of both groups as shown on Table 3. The performance of group B is further proved better than group A from the degree of significance from the Independent Samples Test on Table 4, that is, half of the scores (P value) are all below 0.05 on pretest, posttest and the difference between the two.

Table 3 Group Statistics

Group A & B		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	group A	50	14.20000	11.08225	1.56727
	group B	38	27.10526	17.84436	2.89474
Posttest	group A	50	17.60000	14.36549	2.03159
	group B	38	37.63158	18.51723	3.00389
posttest-pretest	group A	50	3.40000	14.22989	2.01241
	group B	38	10.52632	18.88047	3.06282

Table 4 Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
		pretest	Equal variances assumed	9.86965	0.00230	-4.16818	86.00000	0.00007
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.92045	58.10146	0.00024	-12.90526	3.29178
posttest	Equal variances assumed	2.17422	0.14399	-5.71667	86.00000	0.00000	-20.03158	3.50406
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.52383	67.86738	0.00000	-20.03158	3.62639
posttest-pretest	Equal variances assumed	2.62554	0.10882	-2.01993	86.00000	0.04650	-7.12632	3.52800

est	Equal variances			-1.94454	66.48569	0.05606	-7.12632	3.66478
	not assumed							

Note: (P value=Sig (2-tailed)/2, the result is significant when P<0.05)

Whether the proficiency of group B or the corpora/corpus printout is the key factor to make group B improve more significantly in associating correct propositions with verbs on the case of “on”? We might assume that the subjects of group B are higher achievers than group A, so they will certainly learn and improve themselves no matter what materials are provided. According to the standard deviation on Table 3 and the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances on Table 4, the statistics show that the equal variances between group A and B are assumed on the posttest and the difference between the two tests, but not assumed to be equal on the pretest only. Therefore, the result suggests that not all of the members of group B are higher achievers or group A is full of lower achievers, but both groups include learners of different levels.

The corpora/concordance printout might play an important role of assisting group B in correctly judging the combination of components for phrasal verbs. Consequently group B increases 10.5263 from the pretest to posttest on the mean, but group B only 3.4 higher.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

It would not be correct to suggest that a language only consists of those items which are found in a corpus or concordance instead of the way we learn from reading. As any corpus would be a limited collection of texts, and a large corpus would be doubtlessly provide those items that learners would likely to encounter (Moon, 1997). The result of research demonstrates that corpora/concordance could be an alternative tool for EFL learners to effectively recognize phrasal verbs—one type of multiword units as a holistic unit, without any purpose of ignoring the learning effect reading could definitely attribute as a positive input.

Schmidt (2000) demonstrated that the best way to demonstrate the way language actually works would be to draw learners' attention to the variable expressions, or at least to teach lexical items in a broader context. Therefore, teachers would need not only to extensively use the concordance data as ideal inductive approaches, but also point out the variable expressions as deductive technique. Such a result was found in the study of Chan and Liu (2005), and based on the questionnaire for two weeks of both deductive and inductive approaches they designed for high school students in the EFL classroom. In particular, the research positively improves that the combination of inductive and deductive teaching of collocations positively improves EFL learners' motivation in learning rather than using inductive or deductive teaching exclusively.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is surely interesting to find out the discrepancy in learning effect of phrasal verbs and collocations with two types of different inputs in the EFL classroom. The findings of this study support Corpora and concordance as offering SL/FL learners an effective alternative education method. But the studies limitations need to be noted in order to place its significance in context. First and foremost, the research was conducted within two weeks due to the time constraints. In addition, limited sample size and lack of setting diversity of the study sample attribute the study to the limited significance of the findings. These issues support the need to conduct further long range studies into effective methods for teaching phrasal verbs to Taiwanese students.

Taiwan's university students are media and technologically savvy, and with the evolutionary nature of the English language, the study and implementation of effective phrasal verb education can be, and should be, both enjoyable and educational.

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APPENDIX 1

Class: **No.:** **Name:**

- I. **Multiple Choice:** Please read the following questions and answer by **circling one** appropriate answer from the six in parenthesis.
1. But he had to release his hold on her mouth as he dragged her _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) the stairs, so she screamed at Agnes and her mother, "He's killed him!"
 2. Andrew and Wendy plan to work with drug addicts in Hong Kong and they will soon embark _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) a two-month trial period.
 3. The Pasta Factory, with 104 varieties of fresh and frozen pasta, specialises _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) designer pasta.
 4. In a sense the problem has been foisted _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) the surrounding communities, by the City's development.
 5. He says that the church is dangerous — "not fit for a man of God to officiate _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) a most solemn sacrament".
 6. Moreover, he must come to terms with a new awareness of what he has previously accepted may well seem to verge _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) the ludicrous or to be morally indefensible.
 7. It would be too crude a generalisation, though, to say that critics are concerned with form, while historians are interested _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) the context of art.
 8. In most situations it is unusual and unnecessary to dwell _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) features of the research design, except perhaps in a boring and unread appendix.
 9. She sees that Harriet is quietly gazing _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) her in the red firelight.
 10. A CONVOY of black limousines conveyed the 31 Lebanese Muslim MPs in Saudi Arabia on an extra-parliamentary pilgrimage to Mecca yesterday afternoon, leaving their 31 Christian colleagues behind in Taif to ruminate _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) how best they might protect Christian political power in a new Lebanon.

11. He concluded that the division into different schools by denomination, sex, and age resulted _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) an economically inefficient system.
12. BIIBA 's director of public affairs commented: "Fimbra have clearly reneged _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) their agreement."
13. Needlessly Herr Nordern cleared his throat again, frowning at Paul who was gogging _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) him while stuffing himself with cheese and cold ham.
14. Smaller birds that prey _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) insect pests also raid fruit crops, which must be netted.
15. They will not know what they are going to do, and will probably end _____ (1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) doing nothing.
16. In this exercise students are urged to clear their minds of presuppositions, to concentrate _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) `the words on the page', and then to write down their responses.
17. ACET is in a unique position to meet the need by carrying a high impact message aimed _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) changing high risk behavior.
18. He believes such innovations as `distance working';, which will enable people to operate from home `instead of having to converge _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) places in order to work';, will offer all kinds of promise for improving some of the less agreeable aspects of a business career.
19. "There are no Portuguese first-class or second-class citizens," said Manuel de Silva, Macao's Secretary for Administration and Justice, alluding _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) Britain's progressive downgrading of Hong Kong people's nationality status.
20. Britain 's social engineers had prided themselves _____(1. X 2. at 3. in 4. on 5. to 6. up) the ability to plan as they had done during the war .