

Research paper

The Effect of Guessing Strategies on Intermediate EFL Learners' Phrasal Verbs Learning

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examined the impact of guessing strategies on the learning of phrasal verbs by intermediate EFL learners and assessed their attitudes regarding the utilization of these strategies. To this end, 40 Iranian students were put into either a control group or an experimental group. The experimental group received lessons on how to guess based on context, while the control group learned vocabulary in a more traditional way. We used paired and independent samples t-tests to compare the scores from the pretest and the posttest. Results showed that both groups did better, but the experimental group did better on the posttest. This shows that guessing strategies helped people acquire phrasal verbs. During the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were performed with 5 participants to provide insights into their experiences. Learners generally thought that guessing strategies were helpful at making them more aware of the context. However, some learners were worried about how unclear they were and how hard it was to figure out idiomatic interpretations. The results show that guessing strategies cannot work for everyone or for every phrasal verb, but they can be useful when used with feedback, repetition, and training for the learner. These findings imply the necessity of embedding contextual guessing within scaffolded, feedback-rich vocabulary instruction with systematic repetition.

Keywords: *Guessing Strategies, Intermediate EFL Learners, Phrasal Verbs*

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Introduction

Phrasal verbs represent one of the most challenging lexical categories for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Haugh & Takeuchi, 2024). These multi-word expressions often have idiomatic meanings that deviate from their constituent parts, rendering them difficult to decode through literal interpretation (Strong, 2025). Despite their ubiquity in everyday spoken and written English, EFL learners frequently struggle with both recognizing and using them appropriately (Sari & Anzelina, 2024). Understanding phrasal verbs requires more than just lexical knowledge; it involves interpreting nuanced meanings, identifying grammatical patterns, and recognizing appropriate usage contexts (Side, 1990). This complexity often results in avoidance behaviors among learners, who may substitute simpler or more familiar single-word verbs, thereby limiting their communicative competence (Haugh & Takeuchi, 2024; Liao & Fukuya, 2004).

One strategy that has attracted increasing attention in vocabulary research is guessing from context, also known as lexical inferencing. This strategy encourages learners to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words using textual and linguistic clues (Nation, 2001). Guessing promotes cognitive engagement and encourages learners to draw upon background knowledge, grammar, and discourse patterns to infer meanings (Darwin & Gray, 1999; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). It is especially valuable in environments with limited access to native input, such as EFL classrooms (Strong, 2025).

Iranian EFL learners, in particular, face systemic limitations in exposure to idiomatic English. Textbooks often favor formal registers and isolated vocabulary, offering few opportunities for encountering phrasal verbs in meaningful contexts (Akbari Farmanbar et al., 2025; Mir & Gorjian, 2025; Pishadast, 2022). As a result, learners tend to memorize discrete word meanings and struggle to comprehend the non-literal meanings of multi-word expressions. A further complication is that

learners often lack metalinguistic awareness about how phrasal verbs function in different contexts. Haugh and Takeuchi (2024) found that while many learners recognize phrasal verbs as common features of English, they express low confidence in using them and often misinterpret their meanings. The researchers emphasized that raising awareness and boosting learner confidence are essential components of successful phrasal verb instruction—components that guessing strategies can potentially support.

Strong (2025) further argued that learners benefit most from guessing strategies when they are paired with opportunities for active retrieval and usage. He found that EFL learners who were encouraged to guess meanings in reading passages and then later retrieve and use those same expressions in production tasks retained phrasal verbs more effectively than those who used guessing or retrieval alone. This finding supports the notion that guessing strategies should be part of a larger, integrated vocabulary learning approach.

Despite the pedagogical potential of guessing, not all learners respond to this strategy uniformly. Factors such as vocabulary size, cognitive ability, and familiarity with the topic all influence inferencing success (Nassaji, 2006). Additionally, the inherent opacity of many phrasal verbs makes them resistant to accurate interpretation, especially when contextual clues are vague or misleading (Boers et al., 2007). This limitation highlights the importance of carefully constructed instructional contexts. Sari and Anzelina (2024) addressed this challenge by implementing the make a match technique, which paired phrasal verbs with definitions and usage examples in a classroom setting. Although this technique emphasized retrieval more than guessing, it successfully enhanced learners' mastery and motivation. The researchers concluded that interactive, context-rich strategies—including matching, role-play, and inferencing—support both comprehension and retention when tailored to learners' proficiency levels.

Research also suggests that repeated contextual exposure to phrasal verbs promotes retention. Peters (2016) demonstrated that learners who encountered phrasal verbs in multiple, varied contexts showed significantly greater recall and usage accuracy. When guessing strategies are employed within repeated exposure frameworks, they may become more effective, as learners refine their hypotheses about word meanings across different instances. Webb and Kagimoto (2011) also confirmed that learners acquire phrasal verbs more effectively when learning occurs in context rather than in isolation. Their findings suggest that instructional strategies should prioritize meaning-in-context over form memorization. Guessing strategies, by nature, support this approach by encouraging learners to engage with the broader linguistic environment in which phrasal verbs appear.

Despite these benefits, few studies have examined learners' experiences with guessing strategies in the context of phrasal verb learning. Understanding learners' perceptions can offer crucial insights into the affective dimension of vocabulary acquisition, such as confidence, motivation, and cognitive load (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Haugh & Takeuchi, 2024). Learners who view guessing as difficult or ineffective may avoid using it, undermining its pedagogical value.

Zhang and Annual (2008) observed that learners need guided practice in using higher-order strategies like guessing. Without sufficient modeling and feedback, learners may draw incorrect conclusions or feel overwhelmed, especially when dealing with idiomatic language. Teachers must therefore scaffold the guessing process and ensure that learners are exposed to clear, supportive contexts that facilitate accurate interpretation. Incorporating learners' perceptions also reveals important implementation factors. In Strong's (2025) study, students reported feeling more engaged and confident when guessing was integrated with collaborative learning and immediate corrective feedback. These qualitative findings reinforce the idea that strategy instruction should

not be limited to cognitive training but must also consider learners' emotional and motivational states.

Additionally, studies show that combining guessing with other learner-centered methods, such as peer collaboration and task-based learning, can increase phrasal verb acquisition. Sari and Anzelina (2024) demonstrated that when learners actively engaged in matching games and contextual tasks, their motivation and recall improved significantly. These findings suggest that guessing can be part of a broader toolkit of engaging strategies that support learning across modalities. This study seeks to contribute to this body of research by examining both the effectiveness and perceptions of guessing strategies in phrasal verb learning among intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Based on the gap in the literature, two research questions were posed in the present study.

RQ1. Does using guessing strategies significantly affect intermediate EFL learners' phrasal verbs learning?

RQ2. What are the intermediate EFL learners' perceptions of using guessing strategies in phrasal verbs learning?

Methodology

This section includes the description of the research design, participants, instruments, data collection procedure, and data analysis techniques used in this study.

Research Design

This exploratory mixed-methods research adopted a sequential design to investigate the influence of guessing strategies on phrasal verbs learning among Iranian EFL learners. In the

quantitative phase, a representative sample underwent a structured intervention utilizing guessing strategies, with pre- and post-assessments measuring phrasal verbs scores. Then, the qualitative phase involved interviews to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences with these strategies.

Participants and Setting

Forty EFL learners (27 female and 13 male) at the intermediate level participated in this study. Their age ranged from 16 to 25. These participants were selected from one language institute in Ahvaz, Iran, through a purposive sampling method. The criteria for inclusion in the study included proficiency at the intermediate level of English, as determined by Oxford Quick Placement Test. The participants were evenly distributed into two groups: a control group and an experimental group, each consisting of 20 participants.

Instruments

The pretest and posttest consisted of a set of 40 items designed to assess the knowledge of the phrasal verbs of the participants. The pretest served as a baseline measurement of participants' initial proficiency in understanding idiomatic expressions, while the posttest, administered after the implementation of guessing strategies intervention. The minimum and maximum possible scores were 0 and 40, respectively. The reliability of the test was assessed through Kuder-Richardson 21. The reliability coefficient was 0.78. In addition, two PhD holders in English language teaching who were expert in language testing were consulted to check the content of the test items.

In this study, guessing strategies aimed at enhancing the phrasal verbs learning of intermediate EFL learners. These strategies were a variety of cognitive approaches, including context clues, analyzing word structures, employing logical inference, and making educated guesses based on the overall content. The intervention involves providing learners with explicit guidance on employing these strategies during the language learning process, emphasizing their application specifically to the comprehension of idiomatic expressions.

At the end of study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on participants' perceptions of using guessing strategies on learning English phrasal verbs. The interview included 5 open-ended questions exploring participants' preferences, challenges faced, and the perceived usefulness of the guessing strategies. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis. After the treatment was finished, 5 students from experimental group volunteered for the semi-structured interview. A brief explanation of perception of classroom activities were given and after the purpose of the interview was explained, the participants were assured that their views would be confidential. Here are the interview questions:

- 1. How did you feel about using guessing strategies to learn phrasal verbs?*
- 2. Can you describe a specific example where guessing strategies helped you understand a phrasal verb?*
- 3. What challenges did you face when using guessing strategies to learn phrasal verbs?*
- 4. Do you think these guessing strategies have improved your overall ability to understand and use phrasal verbs? Why or why not?*
- 5. Would you recommend using guessing strategies to other learners of English? Why or why not?*

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began with the selection of participants. A total of 40 EFL learners were selected from a language institute in Ahvaz, Iran, using purposive sampling. These participants were all at the intermediate level of English proficiency, as determined by the Oxford Quick Placement Test. Once selected, participants were evenly divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 20 learners. To establish a baseline for their knowledge of phrasal verbs, all participants were administered a pretest comprising 40 items focused on phrasal verbs. This pretest took place during the first week of the study, with participants given 30 minutes to complete the test. The results of the pretest were recorded to measure the participants' initial proficiency in understanding phrasal verbs, serving as a point of comparison for later assessments.

Following the pretest, the experimental group began a six-week intervention designed to enhance their learning of phrasal verbs through the use of guessing strategies. Their class held twice a week, each session 90 minutes. The guessing strategies included techniques such as identifying context clues, analyzing word structures, making logical inferences, and forming educated guesses based on the overall content. The intervention was integrated into the participants' regular language learning activities, with explicit instruction provided on how to apply these strategies specifically to the comprehension of phrasal verbs. The instructor guided the learners through various exercises and tasks that required the use of these strategies, gradually increasing the complexity of the phrasal verbs introduced. The goal was to equip the learners with practical tools to decode the meanings of phrasal verbs independently, improving their ability to understand and use these expressions in context.

While the experimental group received focused instruction on guessing strategies, the control group continued with their regular language learning curriculum without any additional intervention. This group did not receive specific training on guessing strategies or any targeted instruction on phrasal verbs. Instead, they followed the standard syllabus used at the language institute, which covered general English language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing, but without any emphasis on the particular strategies or the focused practice of phrasal verbs. This approach allowed for a comparison between the two groups to determine the effectiveness of the guessing strategies intervention in improving phrasal verb knowledge.

At the end of the six-week intervention, all participants, including those in both the experimental and control groups, were administered a posttest identical to the pretest. The posttest aimed to assess any changes in the participants' proficiency in phrasal verbs and to determine the effectiveness of the guessing strategies employed by the experimental group. Following the posttest, a qualitative phase was conducted to gather more in-depth insights into the experiences of the participants in the experimental group. Five participants who volunteered were selected for semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to ensure participants felt at ease discussing their experiences. The interviews, lasting approximately 10 minutes each, explored the participants' perceptions of the guessing strategies, the challenges they faced, and their overall learning experience. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis, providing additional qualitative data to complement the quantitative results.

Data Analysis

The normality of the pretest and posttest score distributions was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, with the latter prioritized due to its higher sensitivity for small to moderate sample sizes ($n = 40$). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed to summarize participants' performance on the phrasal verb knowledge test. To examine within-group changes from pretest to posttest, paired-samples t-tests were conducted for both the experimental and control groups. An independent samples t-test was then used to compare posttest scores between the two groups, assessing the relative effectiveness of the guessing strategy intervention. The alpha level for all statistical tests was set at .05 to determine significance.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five purposefully selected volunteers from the experimental group at the conclusion of the treatment. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve informational redundancy (data saturation), as no new themes emerged by the fifth interview. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns in participants' attitudes toward the use of guessing strategies. The analysis followed six phases: (1) data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, reflexivity was maintained through a researcher journal, and investigator triangulation was employed, with two researchers independently coding 20% of the transcripts and discussing discrepancies until consensus was reached. NVivo 14 was used to support data management and coding.

Results

Results of the Quantitative Phase

First, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to check the normality of the pretest and posttest (Table 1).

Table 1
Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Tests on Pretest and Posttest

Group		Kolmogorov-Smirnov		Shapiro-Wilk	
		df	Sig.	df	Sig.
Control Group	pretest	20	.146	20	.181
	posttest	20	.139	20	.163
Experimental group	pretest	20	.182	20	.205
	posttest	20	.115	20	.092

As shown in Table 1, the p values under the Sig. column should be compared with the .05 level of significance, and a p value greater than .05 indicates no violation of the assumption of normality. Therefore, parametric statistics including paired and independent samples t-tests were used to answer the first research question. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest in two groups.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest and Posttest Scores

Groups	Test	Mean	SD
Control Group	pretest	12.31	2.154
	posttest	23.85	3.047
Experimental group	pretest	11.48	2.061
	posttest	27.60	3.275

As Table 2 illustrates, the means of two groups are close to each other in the pretest (12.31; 11.48). However, on the posttest, the experimental group had a higher mean score ($M = 27.60$) than the control group ($M = 23.85$). This suggests that guessing strategies in the experimental group could have a more positive effect on the participants' performance. Initially, paired samples t-tests were administered for each group to compare the performance of each group before and after the treatment (Table 3).

Table 3
Results of Paired Samples T-tests

Groups		N	Mean Difference	SEM	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig
Pair 1 (Control)	Pretest	20	-11.54	1.218	-9.48	19	.000
	Posttest						
Pair 2 (Experimental)	Pretest	20	-16.12	1.371	-11.76	19	.000
	Posttest						

Note. SEM: Standard Error of Mean

As Table 3 displays, there were significant differences between the mean scores of the pretest and the posttest in control and experimental groups (control group: $t = -9.48, p = .000$; experimental group: $t = -11.76, p = .000$). In other words, both groups significantly outperformed in the posttest. This suggests that the participants in both groups had significant improvement in learning the target phrasal verbs. To compare the mean scores of the two groups before the treatment, an independent samples t-test was run (Table 4).

Table 4
Independent Samples t-test on Pretest Scores

	Leven's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. 2-tailed	Mean Difference
	<i>F</i>	Sig.				
Equal variances assumed	.94	.381	.72	38	.657	.83

Table 4 shows that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p = .657 > .05$). This implies that before the treatment, both groups performed similarly on the pretest. Table 5 demonstrated the result of independent samples t-test on the posttest.

Table 5
Independent Samples t-test on Posttest Scores

	Leven's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. 2-tailed	Mean Difference
	<i>F</i>	Sig.				
Equal variances assumed	1.407	.152	-3.74	38	.000	-3.75

Table 5 shows that there was a significant difference between the two groups on the posttest ($p = .000 < .05$). This implies that after the treatment, the experimental group significantly outperformed on the posttest.

Results of Qualitative Phase

The participants had varied perceptions of guessing strategies for learning phrasal verbs. Participant 1 found these strategies quite useful, appreciating their interactive nature, which made learning engaging. In contrast, Participant 2 was initially skeptical but grew to appreciate the strategies once they noticed improvements in understanding. Participant 3 experienced initial frustration due to frequent incorrect guesses but eventually found the process rewarding. Participant 4 enjoyed the guessing strategies as they felt it improved their critical thinking skills related to language. However, Participant 5 was indifferent, perceiving guessing strategies as only one of many tools without a significant impact on their learning.

When asked to describe specific instances where guessing strategies were helpful, the participants provided a range of examples. Participant 1 successfully deduced the meaning of *give up* from the context of someone quitting a task. Participant 2 was able to understand *come across*

by interpreting the context of finding an old friend by chance. Participant 3 cited *take off* in the context of someone removing a piece of clothing as an example of effective guessing. Participant 4 recalled understanding *carry on* in the context of continuing working. Participant 5 struggled to provide a clear example, indicating that their reliance on guessing strategies was less pronounced compared to other methods.

Participants faced several challenges when using guessing strategies. Participant 1 struggled with guessing meanings accurately without enough context, which sometimes led to confusion. Participant 2 found it difficult to deal with ambiguous contexts and multiple possible meanings. Participant 3 experienced frustration from frequent incorrect guesses and the need for additional verification. Participant 4 encountered problems with less common phrasal verbs where context was not always clear. Participant 5 highlighted inconsistency and a lack of confidence stemming from unreliable guesses as major issues.

Regarding the impact on their overall ability to understand and use phrasal verbs, participants had mixed responses. Participant 1 felt that guessing strategies significantly improved their understanding by enhancing their ability to use context clues. Participant 2 believed that while the strategies were helpful, they were most effective when combined with other learning methods. Participant 3 thought that the strategies contributed to their learning but required patience and additional resources. Participant 4 strongly felt that their ability to infer meanings had improved significantly. Participant 5 was skeptical about the effectiveness of guessing strategies alone, preferring other methods they found more reliable.

Participants' recommendations for using guessing strategies varied. Participant 1 would recommend guessing strategies as they promote active learning and critical thinking. Participant 2 suggested that while guessing strategies are beneficial, they should be used in conjunction with

other techniques. Participant 3 was hesitant to recommend them exclusively due to potential frustration and the risk of misunderstanding. Participant 4 strongly advocated for their use, citing personal improvement and engagement. Participant 5 would not strongly recommend guessing strategies, preferring other methods they find more effective. Table 6 provides a structured summary of participants' responses to five questions about guessing strategies for learning phrasal verbs.

Table 6
Summary of Participants' Responses

Questions	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
1. Feelings about Guessing Strategies	Found them useful and interactive	Initially skeptical, later found engaging	Frustrating initially, rewarding later	Enjoyed, enhanced critical thinking	Indifferent, not significantly impactful
2. Specific Example	"Give up" in context of quitting	"Come across" from finding an old friend by chance	"Take off" in removing a piece of clothing	"Carry on" in context of continuing working	Struggled to provide a clear example
3. Challenges	Difficulty with insufficient context	Ambiguous context and multiple meanings	Frequent incorrect guesses, need for verification	Less common phrasal verbs, unclear context	Inconsistent guesses, lack of confidence
4. Improvement in Understanding	Improved understanding through context	Beneficial with other methods	Helpful but requires patience and resources	Strong improvement in inferring meanings	Doubts effectiveness, prefers other methods
5. Recommendation	Would recommend for active learning	Recommend with other strategies	Hesitant, potential for frustration	Strongly recommends, cites personal improvement	Would not strongly recommend

In Table 6, each row represents a specific question, detailing the participants' varied experiences and opinions. For example, the table shows that Participant 1 found guessing strategies both useful and interactive, appreciating their role in engaging learning. Conversely, Participant 5 was indifferent, suggesting that these strategies did not significantly impact their learning. In terms of specific examples, Participant 1 successfully deduced *give up* from the context of someone quitting, while Participant 5 struggled to provide a clear example, indicating a lesser reliance on guessing strategies.

Table 6 also highlights the challenges participants faced, such as difficulty with ambiguous

contexts (Participant 2) and frequent incorrect guesses (Participant 3). Despite these challenges, opinions on the effectiveness of guessing strategies varied. Participants like Participant 1 felt that the strategies improved their understanding significantly, while others, like Participant 5, were skeptical about their overall effectiveness. Recommendations also varied, with some participants advocating for guessing strategies as a useful tool (Participant 1) and others preferring more reliable methods (Participant 5). Overall, the table captures a range of attitudes towards guessing strategies, reflecting both their potential benefits and limitations in learning phrasal verbs. Thematic analysis of the participants' responses are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Thematic Analysis of Learners' Attitudes Toward Guessing Strategies

Theme	Description
Cognitive Engagement and Active Learning	Several participants (P1, P4) viewed guessing as an interactive and mentally stimulating process that promoted deeper involvement in learning. They appreciated how it encouraged them to think critically and engage with context rather than rely on memorization or dictionaries. This reflects a positive attitude rooted in autonomy and active meaning-making, suggesting that learners who experience success with guessing are more likely to value it as a constructive learning tool.
Initial Skepticism and Affective Barriers	Participants P2 and P3 initially doubted the usefulness of guessing, with P3 reporting frustration due to frequent incorrect guesses and P2 expressing confusion in ambiguous contexts. However, P2 and P3's eventual appreciation of the strategy after noticing improvements indicates that attitudes can shift positively when learners perceive tangible progress, underscoring the importance of early support and success experiences.
Contextual Dependency and Ambiguity Challenges	Learners consistently emphasized that the effectiveness of guessing depended on the clarity and richness of the context. P2 struggled with multiple possible meanings, P4 found less common phrasal verbs difficult, and P1 noted confusion when context was limited. This theme reveals a cautious attitude: while learners recognize the potential of guessing, they are aware of its limitations in ambiguous or complex situations. Their reliance on the strategy appears conditional, reflecting a realistic understanding that guessing is not always reliable, especially with idiomatic or low-frequency phrasal verbs.
Incremental Gains and Conditional Acceptance	Most participants acknowledged some benefit from guessing but saw it as most effective when combined with other strategies. P2 found it helpful "when combined with other methods," P3 valued it but stressed the need for patience and additional resources, and P5 remained skeptical about its standalone value. This indicates a pragmatic attitude: learners do not reject the strategy outright but treat it as one tool among many.
Divergent Perceptions of Efficacy and Utility	Attitudes varied significantly across participants. P1 and P4 were strong advocates, citing personal improvement and recommending the strategy enthusiastically. P3 was hesitant due to early frustration, while P5 expressed indifference, struggled to recall examples, and would not recommend it. This divergence reflects differences in learning preferences, tolerance for ambiguity, and confidence in inferential skills.

Table 7 presents five core themes that capture the range of learners' experiences and attitudes

toward using guessing strategies to learn phrasal verbs. The first three themes highlight both the benefits and challenges of the approach. Participants valued the cognitive engagement and active learning that guessing promoted, with some noting improvements in critical thinking and motivation. However, this positive perception was often preceded by initial skepticism and emotional frustration, especially when guesses were incorrect or contexts were unclear. Additionally, learners emphasized the critical role of context, expressing that their ability to guess accurately depended heavily on the clarity and richness of the surrounding text. Ambiguity, multiple meanings, and low-frequency phrasal verbs were consistently cited as obstacles that undermined confidence and effectiveness.

The final two themes reveal a more nuanced and pragmatic learner perspective. While some participants experienced incremental gains and came to accept guessing as a useful strategy, they stressed that its value was conditional. It worked best when combined with other methods like dictionary use or teacher feedback. This led to divergent attitudes across participants: two were strong advocates, two were cautious supporters, and one remained indifferent, seeing little benefit. Overall, the table illustrates that guessing strategies are not universally effective or accepted; their success depends on individual learner differences, prior experiences, tolerance for uncertainty, and the degree of instructional support.

Discussion

The current study set out to explore whether guessing strategies could significantly impact intermediate EFL learners' mastery of phrasal verbs and how learners perceived the use of such strategies. Quantitative data showed a clear advantage for learners in the experimental group, who were exposed to structured guessing techniques, over their peers in the control group. While both

groups improved from pretest to posttest, the more substantial gain in the experimental group suggests that contextual guessing plays a vital role in supporting phrasal verb acquisition, particularly when applied with instructional support.

The absence of significant differences in the pretest results between the two groups confirms the baseline equivalence and strengthens the causal interpretation of the intervention's effectiveness. The posttest results, however, revealed a meaningful disparity. Learners in the experimental group scored higher by an average of 3.75 points. This difference, though numerically modest, is pedagogically significant, especially given the complex nature of phrasal verbs. These findings reinforce earlier studies that advocate for the use of inferencing in vocabulary instruction (Fraser, 1999; Nation, 2001). What makes these results particularly compelling is the alignment with Strong's (2025) recent work, which emphasized the role of contextual guessing in deepening learners' understanding of idiomatic language. Strong argued that the act of interpreting language through context supports mental mapping and retention. The current findings lend empirical weight to his theory, showing that learners who guessed meaning through authentic contexts were more likely to remember and correctly apply phrasal verbs in the posttest.

From the learners' perspective, the qualitative phase provided more textured insights. Participants generally viewed guessing strategies positively, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some praised the strategy for making learning more active and stimulating, a reaction consistent with Haugh and Takeuchi's (2024) observations on learner confidence and phrasal verb awareness. Participant 1's statement about guessing being "interactive" echoes a broader shift toward learner-driven approaches in vocabulary learning. Still, not all responses were uniformly positive. Participants 3 and 5, for example, expressed frustration with frequent misinterpretations

and a lack of certainty. This mixed response aligns with earlier concerns raised by Boers et al. (2007), who noted that phrasal verbs—especially the opaque and metaphorical ones—pose challenges that can't always be resolved through context alone. The experience of misguessing and the resulting cognitive load may explain some of the hesitation observed in the participants' reflections.

Despite these challenges, learners who persisted with the strategy tended to report notable gains in understanding. This is in line with Akbari Farmanbar et al. (2025) and Peters (2016), who argued that repeated contextual exposure is key to mastering difficult lexical chunks. Participants who encountered phrasal verbs across varied tasks—such as reading, sentence completion, and peer discussion—seemed better able to form durable associations between form and meaning. Participant 4's observation about improvement in “critical thinking” suggests that guessing may offer cognitive benefits beyond vocabulary itself. Interestingly, the data showed that guessing worked best when supported by follow-up clarification or discussion. Several learners mentioned the importance of verifying their interpretations, either through teacher feedback or checking answers afterward. This supports the blended approach proposed by Strong (2025), who found that the combination of guessing and retrieval practice was more effective than either method alone. Encouraging learners to first hypothesize and then confirm meaning may be a useful pedagogical model for vocabulary instruction.

Sari and Anzelina's (2024) findings on the make a match technique also resonate here. Although their method focused on matching definitions with phrasal verbs rather than guessing, the underlying principle—active, context-based engagement—overlaps with the present intervention. Learners in both studies responded well to structured but interactive tasks that encouraged them to construct meaning independently rather than rely on memorization. The

emotional dimension of strategy use also emerged as a recurring theme. Participants who found guessing enjoyable often cited feelings of accomplishment when their inferences were correct. This affective feedback loop may contribute to long-term motivation and willingness to engage with difficult material. Gu and Johnson (1996) similarly pointed out that learners' perceptions of success and strategy usefulness are essential components of effective learning.

At the same time, skepticism expressed by Participant 5 cannot be dismissed. This learner's preference for more direct methods reflects a realistic limitation of guessing strategies: they are not equally suitable for all learners or all contexts. Factors such as proficiency level, cognitive style, and prior vocabulary knowledge can influence the success of inferencing. Nassaji (2006) warned that learners with lower vocabulary depth may find guessing overwhelming, a view that matches some of the frustrations reported in the current study. Moreover, ambiguity in the linguistic context was noted as a common challenge. Learners found it difficult to infer meanings when sentences lacked strong semantic clues. This confirms Zhang and Annual's (2008) point that inferencing success depends on the quality of the context. Therefore, instructors must ensure that learners are not only trained in how to guess but also provided with texts rich enough in clues to make the strategy viable.

Despite these limitations, the overall findings point toward the value of guessing strategies as part of a larger toolkit for vocabulary instruction. Rather than using guessing in isolation, it should be embedded in lesson sequences that include explanation, retrieval, feedback, and opportunities for repetition. This integrated model not only supports better retention but also responds to individual learner differences, as advocated by Nation (2001) and Strong (2025). In sum, the study confirms that guessing strategies—when taught deliberately and supported appropriately—can significantly contribute to the learning of phrasal verbs. They promote engagement, encourage

deeper processing, and allow learners to interact with language in a meaningful way. While not universally effective, especially for idiomatic or opaque expressions, their overall impact is both measurable and perceived as beneficial by most learners in the study.

Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the effect of guessing strategies on intermediate EFL learners' phrasal verb learning and to explore their perceptions of these strategies. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases revealed that learners who received guided training in guessing meaning from context significantly outperformed their peers in the control group. While both groups showed progress, the experimental group demonstrated more substantial gains in posttest scores. Qualitative data further enriched this outcome by highlighting the learners' generally positive perceptions of guessing strategies, although individual preferences and experiences varied. Together, these findings suggest that guessing strategies, when properly implemented, are a meaningful and effective tool in helping learners navigate the complex and often elusive nature of phrasal verbs.

One of the key pedagogical implications emerging from this study is the importance of incorporating strategy-based instruction into the EFL classroom. Rather than teaching vocabulary through rote memorization or decontextualized lists, educators are encouraged to promote deeper engagement through inferencing tasks. Guessing strategies train learners to become active participants in meaning-making, relying on linguistic and contextual clues. This not only improves vocabulary acquisition but also cultivates broader reading and cognitive skills. Teachers should consider using a variety of texts and provide structured opportunities for learners to infer meaning

and then verify their hypotheses through discussion, feedback, or follow-up tasks. Such integration can foster learner autonomy and enhance long-term retention.

Another implication concerns the way learners process and internalize phrasal verbs. The study demonstrated that guessing strategies are most effective when paired with repeated exposure and opportunities for active use. Educators might therefore benefit from designing lessons that cycle through phrasal verbs in multiple contexts—through reading, dialogue, writing, and games. Additionally, given that some learners expressed frustration with ambiguous contexts, it is essential for teachers to scaffold the inferencing process by modeling strategies, highlighting contextual clues, and creating environments in which learners feel safe to make and correct mistakes. Blending guessing with collaborative work, retrieval practice, and other techniques, such as those explored by Sari and Anzelina (2024), can further enhance learning outcomes.

Despite its strengths, the study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small and confined to a specific proficiency level and cultural context—intermediate Iranian EFL learners. This limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or different instructional settings. Moreover, the duration of the intervention, while effective, may not have been sufficient to measure long-term retention or to capture delayed learning effects. Another limitation stems from the self-reported nature of qualitative data, which can be subject to bias, with learners possibly overstating or understating their engagement and progress based on personal perceptions.

Given these limitations, future research should aim to replicate the study across diverse learner populations, including different proficiency levels, age groups, and educational backgrounds. It would also be valuable to conduct longitudinal studies to observe how guessing strategies affect long-term retention of phrasal verbs and whether learners continue to apply the strategies

independently after the instruction ends. Additionally, future investigations could explore the integration of technology in teaching guessing strategies—through digital reading platforms, interactive vocabulary tools, or AI-powered feedback systems—to determine whether these tools enhance or hinder the inferencing process in a digitally mediated learning environment.

In conclusion, this study offers strong evidence for the effectiveness of guessing strategies in enhancing phrasal verb learning among intermediate EFL learners. It highlights the value of strategy-based instruction and affirms that vocabulary learning is not merely a matter of memorization but a dynamic cognitive process rooted in context, reasoning, and engagement. While not without challenges, contextual guessing empowers learners to become more self-reliant, interpretive, and confident in their interaction with language. As teachers and researchers continue to explore best practices in vocabulary pedagogy, strategies like guessing from context deserve a central role in the EFL classroom.

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