

The Effect of Avoidance and Preference on Thai Learners' Word Selection in English Language Production: Single-Word and Multi-Word Units

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 31 Aug 2023 Accepted: 4 Jul 2025 Available online: 22 Jul 2025	<i>This study aimed to explore 1) Thai learners' selections of single-word and multi-word units in English language production, and 2) the reasons for their selections of single-word and multi-word units. The participants in this study comprised 202 undergraduate students. Three research instruments were used in this study: a comprehension test, a word selection test, and an avoidance and preference questionnaire. The findings showed that in total, the learners tended to favor multi-word units more than single-word units. The results also indicated that the learners preferred literal phrasal verbs and compounds over their single-word equivalents. However, single-word units were preferred over figurative phrasal verbs and idioms by the learners. Based on the t-test results, overall, there were no statistically significant differences in the learners' selection of single-word and multi-word units. Nevertheless, the learners' responses to the avoidance and preference questionnaire reflected their preference for selecting both word types (single-word and multi-word units) more than their avoidance. This implies that preference may have a significant influence on their selection of word types, at least more so than avoidance. This may imply that preference have a higher effect on their selection of both word types than avoidance.</i>
Keywords: Multi-word unit Single-word unit Avoidance Preference Thai learners	

INTRODUCTION

A lot of research has long emphasized learners' vocabulary mastery since it is a crucial component of every language and has been accepted among language researchers as a strong indicator of learners' language proficiency (Nation, 2001; Qian & Lin, 2020). Learners who possess a high level of vocabulary knowledge are therefore considered masters of those languages. In recent vocabulary studies, researchers have dedicated attention to studying vocabulary separately based on word categories such as single-word and multi-word units (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007; Tomczak & Lew, 2019). Unlike single-word units, multi-word units are groups of words frequently used by native speakers in a given language. They are pre-packed and used as a whole. Thus, using multi-word units in a language can significantly enhance the naturalness of learners' language production. Therefore, it is undeniable that multi-word units are crucial for effective communication, especially in informal spoken and written discourse (Masini, 2019; Phongphio & Schmitt 2006). However, learners often encounter

difficulties in applying multi-word units in their production of English language and tend to avoid using multi-word units and substitute them with single-word equivalents instead. To gain a deeper understanding of this problematic situation, this study aimed to explore learners' selections of single-word and multi-word units in their English language production and their reasons behind such selections..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Single-word and multi-word units

Multi-word units are often referred to as multi-word expressions, multi-word chunks, fixed expressions, and extended lexical units (Hüning & Schlücker, 2015). They have been defined differently by different researchers. According to Sprenger (2003), multi-word units are “fixed expressions referring to the specific combination of two or more words that are typically used to express a specific concept” (p. 4). Odiijk (2013), on the other hand, defined multi-word units as sets of words that frequently occur in language and explains that their meanings cannot be discerned from the combined meanings of their individual constituents. For Masini (2019), multi-word units were defined as “linguistic objects formed by two or more words that behave like ‘a unit’ or ‘chunk’ in that they display some formal functional idiosyncratic properties with respect to free word combinations” (p. 1). Overall, the definitions of multi-word units presented by past researchers seem to have similar concepts. Multi-word units are generally defined as two or more words combined together, but cannot be translated literally from their combined meanings.

Some researchers propose that the properties of multi-word units can be used to distinguish them from other types of words. For example, Hüning and Schlucker (2015) assert that there are four properties for identifying multi-word units. Firstly, a multi-word unit behaves like a single unit. Even though it consists of two or more words, we recognize it as a group. Secondly, a multi-word unit has a non-compositional meaning. The meanings of multi-word units cannot be interpreted by their elements, e.g., *break a leg* (meaning = good luck), and *hang up* (meaning = end a phone call). Thirdly, a multi-word unit is traditionally a syntactically fixed expression. They tend to have invariant forms, e.g., *thick skin*, and *in a minute*. Fourthly, a multi-word unit is a combination of a minimum of two words that frequently co-occur more than it happens by chance, e.g., *take place*, and *in other words*. According to Constant et al. (2017), multi-word units can be categorized by their co-occurrence and non-compositionality. Multi-word units are groups of words that are intently and frequently put together. For example, in the case of the multi-word unit “*soft drink*”, “*soft*” is always used with “*drink*” to convey the meaning “*alcohol-free drink*”. Synonyms such as *fluffy*, *spongy*, or *mushy* cannot be used instead. Moreover, the meaning of each multi-word unit cannot be inferred directly from its individual words combined. When those words are used together, they create their own meanings e.g., *keep in mind* (meaning = remember something). Similar to Constant et al. (2017) and Hüning and Schlucker (2015), Masini’s (2019) definition also implies that multi-word units have figurative meanings. These meanings are often opaque (e.g., *show up*, and *helping hand*) or impossible to discern (e.g., *play out*, and *on the other hand*) from their combined

constituents. Another key property of multi-word units is invariability where individual words of each multi-word unit are attached to one another rigidly (e.g., *at the moment*, and *up in the air*).

In order to distinguish between the single-word and multi-word units used in this study, the definition of single-word units will be provided based on the definitions of the multi-word units presented above. Hence, single-word units are words consisting of one free morpheme (e.g., *bore*, *blanket*, and *appropriate*) or words that have one free morpheme and other bound morphemes, e.g., *boring* (*bore* = free morpheme, *-ing* = bound morpheme), *blankets* (*blanket* = free morpheme, *-s* = bound morpheme), and *inappropriately* (*in-* = bound morpheme, *appropriate* = free morpheme, *-ly* = bound morpheme). When two or more words of this type are combined together, their meanings can be translated literally from their components.

Compared to multi-word units, learners are often more familiar with single-word units as they are often taught in class. Nation and Meara (2002) stated that learners with a high level of single-word vocabulary were able to produce languages fluently. Thus, the importance of single-word vocabulary is undeniable. With that said, multi-word units are vital parts of language learning as well. Learners are required to remember and use them as a whole chunk (Wray & Perkins, 2000). According to Pawley and Syder's (1983) study, native language speakers are able to produce language appropriately and fluently because of their high-level command of multi-word units. This is in line with Ushigusa's (2008) study which showed that learners who had advanced knowledge of multi-word units tended to reach near-native proficiency level. Moreover, in certain situations, multi-word units sound more natural than single-word units in informal speech (Masini, 2019; Phongphio & Schmitt, 2006). For example, consider these two sentences: "I have been *throwing up* all day." and "I have been vomiting all day". Both convey the same meaning. However, the use of the multi-word unit "*throw up*" sounds more native-like than the single-word unit "*vomit*". Thus, multi-word knowledge is crucial in improving learners' productive language skills.

In order to improve vocabulary teaching methods and expand learners' use of multi-word units, understanding the decisions behind their selections was vital. According to human decision-making processes, Dietrich (2010) and Hick et al. (2021) found that it is influenced by many factors. These factors included human cognition, past experiences, emotional differences, and individual differences. Among the factors mentioned above, emotions were found to have a strong effect on human decision-making processes (Linuma & Kogiso, 2021) and learners' emotions also play a critical role in developing their language learning (Shao et al., 2019). There are two types of emotions: positive emotions (e.g., *enjoyment*, *good surprise*, *happiness*, and *hope*) and negative emotions (e.g., *anger*, *anxiety*, *fear*, and *nervousness*). According to O'Toole et al.'s (2021) research, it was found that negative emotions caused people's avoidance of a choice, while positive emotions resulted in people's preference of a choice. This present study, therefore, aims to shed light on learners' avoidance of and preference for specific vocabulary, in this case, single-word and multi-word units.

Avoidance of and preference for using single-word and multi-word units in English language production

Studying learners' avoidance of and preference for using single-word and multi-word vocabulary did not provide us with only information behind their decisions, but also their learning styles. According to Anderson (2016), learning style refers to "the overall patterns that provide directions to learning and teaching" (p. 5). Many researchers believe that different individuals learn differently. Having information of an individual's learning style helps educational planners and teachers create effective lessons (Montgomery & Grout, 1998) because they give us clues about how a learner's mind operates. Based on learning styles, the word "*preference*" used in this study is defined as a condition related to learning which encourages a learner to use single-word and multi-word units in their English language production. On the other hand, the word "*avoidance*" used in this study is defined as a condition related to learning which inhibits a learner to use single-word and multi-word vocabulary in their English language production. Thus, knowledge of learners' avoidance of and preference for using single-word and multi-word units provides useful information for designing effective vocabulary instructions.

In terms of language learning preferences, many linguistic researchers have different definitions and schools of thought, but they all fall under the same umbrella concept, that is the learners' preferred language-learning modes when attaining new information or skills. Based on several studies, learners' preferences are believed to be one of the key factors to learning and teaching achievement (Lau & Gardner, 2019). Certainly, learners can be different in terms of their learning styles, but each individual is believed to have their own learning preferences (Rumana, 2017). Even though learners recognize a variety of learning styles, they tend to lean towards one or more learning styles based on their preferences (Nosisana, 2015).

Furthermore, previous studies pointed out that teachers without awareness of learners' learning preferences often struggled with learners' learning behaviors and unsuccessful learning outcomes. Peacock (2001) indicated that the mismatch between learners' learning preferences and teachers' teaching styles caused negative consequences for learners (for example, *denying learning circumstances, having below-expected standards, or failing subjects*). As a result, many studies have been conducted on learners' preferences in various fields of language learning. These include, for example, studies on learners' preference for learning general language skills, grammar, and reading. Thus, true acknowledgement of learners' individual differences in terms of learning preferences can effectively improve their language learning.

Avoidance is a behavior in which learners avoid target features when they find them too difficult (Schachter, 1974). The concept of avoidance was first founded by Schachter (1974). She pointed out that native speakers of Chinese and Japanese language made fewer errors in using the relative clauses than the native speakers of Persian and Arabic because the Chinese and Japanese learners avoided producing relative clauses they were not confident in using. Since then, many studies have paid more attention to the phenomenon of avoidance. However, some researchers also criticized Schachter's (1974) study (Kleinmann, 1977; Lao & Fukuya,

2004). They argued that the Chinese and Japanese learners might have not produced the relative clauses due to their lack of knowledge. Moreover, they stated that learners' non-use of linguistic features caused by a lack of knowledge could not be interpreted as avoidance; it was ignorance. This was in line with Laufer and Eliasson's (1993) study as well, where they said that "avoidance is not to be equated with ignorance" (p. 36). Therefore, ignorance is defined as a state of mind and is related to scales by which people can memorize information. However, avoidance refers to a strategy that people use to handle the information they memorize. Thus, avoidance is the absence of usage among learners who already recognize the linguistic features.

As mentioned earlier, multi-word units are more commonly used in informal spoken discourse (Masini, 2019; Phongphio & Schmitt, 2006) as they do not seem to appear much in formal language use. Being able to use multi-word units tends to allude to fluency and natural production. However, learners are likely to under-utilize them in English language production. According to past vocabulary research, numerous studies have pointed out that avoidance is the key obstacle learners face in using multi-word units in their language use. Based on Kosolsombat and Pongpairoj's (2017) study which examined Thai university students' avoidance of English phrasal verbs, the results revealed that the students used single-word verbs more than multi-word verbs. It was then concluded that Thai students avoided applying multi-word verbs in their language use and the main cause of their avoidance was the semantic complexity of English phrasal verbs. This was also in line with Liao and Fukuya (2004) who aimed to study Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs. Their findings indicated that their intermediate learners avoided using phrasal verbs. On the other hand, their advanced learners and native speakers did not show much avoidance in comparison. Furthermore, it was found that the advanced learners also used phrasal verbs less so than the native speakers. This was likely due to interference from the learners' L1 (Chinese) which led to the Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs. Moreover, according to Barekat and Baniasad (2014) who carried out a study on the avoidance of phrasal verbs in intermediate Persian learners' writing, they also found that the learners avoided using phrasal verbs and preferred single-word verbs. This was again due to the L1-L2 structural differences between Persian and English. He explained that "the phrasal verb structure is a peculiarity of the Germanic languages which has no parallel in Persian" (p. 347). Moreover, idiomatic meanings of phrasal verbs were another cause of the learners' avoidance as their meanings cannot be translated literally from their individual parts.

Despite all that, however, some research findings showed that not all learners avoid using multi-word units. For instance, in Laufer's (2000) study on L2 learners' avoidance of four types of idioms (i.e., exact translation, partial translation, L1 different idioms, and L1 non-idioms), she found that there was no significant difference between learners' responses to idioms and non-idioms. Partial translation and L1 non-idioms were also found to be least used by the learners. She then concluded that the learners as a whole did not tend to avoid using idioms, and the degree of the learners' avoidance correlated with the degree of L1-L2 similarity. Besides that, there was also a relationship between the learners' idiom avoidance and language proficiency level. Similarly, Boontong (2015) studied Thai learners' preference for phrasal verbs. The subjects were grouped into three English proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate, and upper intermediate. The findings revealed that the beginner learners preferred the phrasal verbs over the single-word verbs, the intermediate learners preferred the single-word verbs

over the multi-word verbs, and the upper intermediate learners equally favored the phrasal verbs and the single-word verbs. It was concluded that learners generally preferred the phrasal verbs more so than the single-word verbs. In other words, the learners did not avoid using the phrasal verbs. These findings were also not in line with those of the previous studies which mainly believed that learners with higher language proficiency will apply less avoidance strategies. He explained that the results of the beginner learners' high-level use of the phrasal verbs might be caused by their familiarity with the target phrasal verbs; they might have frequent and extensive exposure to phrasal verbs. For the upper-intermediate learners though, they equally preferred both verb types. This might be because learners with higher language proficiency were able to use phrasal verbs and single-word verbs freely as they wish. He finally pointed out that "while proficiency level may not play a role in the recognition of phrasal verbs, it facilitates a switch between phrasal verbs and single-word verbs" (p. 27).

Based on the aforementioned research related to learners' selection of single-word and multi-word units in their language production, there is no agreement on whether learners avoid using multi-word units or prefer to use them. Therefore, the objective of this present study was to clarify learners' selection of the two word types (single-word and multi-word units) in their language production. In addition, this study also aimed to determine the effects of avoidance and preference on their selection of single-word and multi-word units.

Research questions

1. Of the two types of word units (single-word and multi-word units), which type did learners choose to use in their language production?
2. Are there any significant differences between the learners' single-word and multi-word unit selection?
3. What are the reasons for the learners' selection of such word units?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 202 Thai undergraduate students enrolled in English major programs participated in this study. Of the total, 79 were first-year undergraduate students, 61 were second-year undergraduate students, and 62 were third-year undergraduate students. Their level of English proficiency was estimated to be between intermediate level (B1) and upper-intermediate level (B2), based on the CEFR standard (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

Research instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of: 1) a comprehension test, 2) a word selection test, and 3) an avoidance & preference questionnaire. The formats of the first two instruments were modified based on previous studies aiming to investigate learners' avoidance of phrasal

verbs (Kosolsombat & Pongpairroj, 2017; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). However, the multi-word units used in this present study were different from theirs. For the third instrument, it was newly developed. All three research instruments were approved by three committee members and had been pilot-tested by the researcher. The brief details of each research instrument are as follows:

Research instruments	Objectives
Comprehension test	<p>To reveal learners' knowledge of multi-word units and their single-word equivalents.</p> <p>The researcher needs this information because words not chosen by learners who do not know both word types (multi-word units and their single-word equivalents) cannot be considered as avoidance (Kleinmann, 1977; Lao & Fukuya, 2004). Thus, only the data of learners who know the meanings of both word types were continuously calculated.</p>
Word selection test	<p>To reveal learners' selection of single-word and multi-word units in their language production. In other words, this test shows whether learners want to use single-word or multi-word units in the sentences provided.</p>
Avoidance & preference questionnaire	<p>To reveal learners' reasons for selecting single-word and multi-word units.</p> <p>Some reasons presented in the questionnaire reflect learners' preferences and avoidances for choosing a particular word type.</p>

Comprehension test

The objective of the comprehension test was to expose the participants' knowledge of multi-word units and their single-word equivalents. The test consisted of forty items divided across four multi-word types: literal phrasal verbs (10 items), figurative phrasal verbs (10 items), idioms (10 items), and compound words (10 items). Phrasal verbs are a combination of verbs with a preposition or adverb, resulting in a new meaning. They can be categorized into two main types based on their idiomatic meanings: literal phrasal verbs and figurative phrasal verbs. Literal phrasal verbs have meanings that can be deduced from the meanings of their individual components (e.g., *show up*, and *pick out*). Figurative phrasal verbs have meanings that are not directly derived from the individual components and their meanings are highly idiomatic (e.g., *carry on*, and *stand out*). Idioms are phrases or expressions that are used in a fixed order and their meanings are different from the meanings of the words combined (e.g., *keep in touch*, and *up in the air*). Compound words are two or more words that are grouped together to create new words and their meanings are not related to the meanings of each word combined (e.g., *heart attack*, and *helping hand*). These four types of multi-word units were chosen to use in this study because of their significant influence in language learning. As we can see, many studies have shown interest in studying phrasal verbs (Garnier & Schmitt, 2015; Liao & Fukuya, 2004), idioms (Elkilic, 2008; Laufer, 2000), and compound words (Alzi'abi, 2022; Sun et al., 2021).

The forty multi-word units used in this study were selected from different sources. The literal and figurative phrasal verbs in the test were chosen from Gardnier and Schmitt's (2015) study that investigated the most frequently used phrasal verbs in English and their most frequent meaning senses. Among the 150 phrasal verbs that appeared in their paper, this present study selected only the phrasal verbs that have the highest frequent meaning senses of over 50 percent. This ensures that the meanings of the phrasal verbs used in the research instruments are commonly used. Some examples from Gardnier and Schmitt's (2015) study are as follows:

FIND OUT

1. Discover STH; obtain knowledge of STH (100%)

We need to find out who did this to her.

SET UP

1. Establish or create STH; arrange for STH to happen or exist (64.5%)

An advisory committee is being set up.

2. Place STH in a particular spot or position (16.5%)

We need to set up a few more chairs so everyone can sit down.

Moreover, the idioms were chosen from Liu's (2003) study. His study aimed to discover frequently used idioms in English. For the compound words, they were chosen from a variety of studies from past researchers such as Durrant (2008), Fernández and Schmitt (2015), Gyllstad (2007), Macis and Schmitt (2016), Nguyen and Webb (2016), Simpson and Mendis (2003), and Siyanova and Schmitt (2008); their research objectives were to examine collocations frequently used in English.

Each test item had one target multi-word unit and one sentence. The sentence presented in each item would help learners answer the only expected meaning since some multi-word units are polysemous. In this test, the participants were asked to find the single-word equivalent of each multi-word unit. An example is shown below.

Example hold on: You have to hold on until I arrive.
 a. stop (b.) wait c. hold d. stay

Word selection test

This test aimed to reveal information about learners' decisions on the use of the two word types (single-word and multi-word units) in their English language production. There were forty items in the word selection test and all the target words used in this test were the same as the ones used in the comprehension test. Each item contained one sentence and two word options: a multi-word unit and a single-word equivalent. In the test, the learners were asked to read the sentence and select only one of the two word options to fill in the blanks. An example of the test is presented below.

Example I can _____ another minute, then I'll have to go to the train station.
a. wait b. hold on

Avoidance & preference questionnaire

This questionnaire was used to explore learners' reasons for choosing single-word and multi-word units. Again, the target words used in the questionnaire were the same as the ones used in the two previous tests. Each item comprised eight reasons: three reasons reflecting avoidance in learners' word selection (i.e., "*inconfident to use a word with difficult structure*", "*unsure of the meaning of other words*", and "*inconfident to use a long word*") and five reasons reflecting preference in learners' word selection (i.e., "*familiar*", "*sound natural*", "*short word*", "*demonstrate language ability*", and "*easy to understand*").

The two reasons "*inconfident to use a word with difficult structure*" and "*unsure of the meaning of other words*" were adapted from previous studies researching reasons for learners' avoidance of multi-word units (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer, 2000; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). For reasons reflecting the preference of multi-word units, the reason "*familiar*" was also selected from previous studies investigating reasons for learners' preference of multi-word units (Boontong, 2015; Dagut & Laufer, 1985). The reasons "*short word*", and "*inconfident to use a long word*", on the other hand, were selected based on the nature of single-word and multi-word units. Single-word units (e.g., *wait*, *represent*, and *remember*) typically carry a simple and short structure; however, multi-word units typically contain two or more words working together in tandem (e.g., *hold on*, *stand for*, and *bear in mind*). As for the reasons "*sound natural*", "*demonstrate language ability*", and "*easy to understand*", they were derived from the additional reasons given by the participants in the pilot study.

In this questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide the reasons behind their selection of words in the word selection test. They were required to choose three reasons and designate them with numbers from 1 to 3 based on the degree of each reason's influence on their selection (with 1 being most influential and 3 being least influential). An example from the questionnaire is provided as follows:

Example I can _____ *wait / hold on* _____ another minute, then I'll have to go to the train station.

<input type="checkbox"/> familiar	<input type="checkbox"/> easy to understand
<input type="checkbox"/> sound natural	<input type="checkbox"/> inconfident to use a word with difficult structure
<input type="checkbox"/> short word	<input type="checkbox"/> unsure the meaning of other words
<input type="checkbox"/> demonstrate language ability	<input type="checkbox"/> inconfident to use a long word
<input type="checkbox"/> others	

Data collection

All 202 undergraduate students were asked to complete all three research instruments (comprehension test, word selection test, and avoidance & preference questionnaire). There were two stages as follows:

Stage 1: At this stage, the learners were asked to finish the two research instruments (the word selection test, and the avoidance and preference questionnaire). Firstly, the word selection test was administered to the learners. They were asked to read each sentence and select only one word (single-word option or multi-word option) to fill in the blank. They were given 20 minutes to complete this test. After about 30 minutes, they were given the avoidance & preference questionnaire. They were then asked to write the word they selected in the earlier test (the word selection test). After that, they were asked to provide three reasons for selecting those words by writing the numbers 1 to 3; each reason in the questionnaire was also carefully explained. They had 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Stage 2: A week later, the comprehension test was delivered to the learners. They were given 20 minutes to choose single-word units which had the closest meanings to the underlined multi-word units. The comprehension test was administered after the two research instruments because the sentences and the target words used in the comprehension test might give the learners some hints in discovering the meaning of the multi-word vocabulary and could affect their selection of single-word and multi-word units.

Data analysis

Firstly, each item of the comprehension test was analyzed individually to reveal whether the learners knew the meanings of both multi-word units and their single-word equivalents. This was because, as mentioned by Kleinmann (1977) and Lao and Fukuya (2004), the nonuse of linguistic features by those who lack their knowledge cannot be deemed to be avoidance. Since there were four options in the test, the only learners who chose the correct single-word equivalents of each multi-word unit on the comprehension test were considered to be knowledgeable of both word types. Thus, only the data of those knowledgeable learners were continuously used in the stages of data analysis. In other words, the participants were analyzed based on each item. Therefore, only the responses of learners who have knowledge of multi-word units and their single-word equivalents in the word selection test and the avoidance & preference questionnaire were used to answer the three research questions.

To answer the first research question “Of the two types of word units (single-word and multi-word units), which type did learners choose to use in their language production?”, data collected from the word selection test were analyzed. Descriptive statistics were also used to compute the summary and percentage of the learners’ selection of both word types.

To answer the second research question “Are there any significant differences between the learners’ single-word and multi-word unit selection?”, data collected from the word selection test were analyzed again. A paired t-test was also performed to compare the learners’ selection of single-word and multi-word units.

To answer the third research question “What are the reasons for the learners’ selection of such word units?”, the data obtained from both the word selection test and the avoidance & preference questionnaire were analyzed. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the percentage of frequently given reasons for their selection of single-word and multi-word units.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Of the two types of word units (single-word and multi-word units), which type did learners choose to use in their language production?

The percentages of single-word and multi-word units selected by the learners are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Percentages of the learners' selection of the single-word and multi-word units

Items	Types of multi-word units	Possibilities for selecting word units (number of participants who recognized the meanings of each multi-word unit and its single-word equivalent)	Word selection					
			Multi-word units			Single-word equivalents		
			Words	No. of selections	%	Words	No. of selections	%
1	literal phrasal verb	191	find out	71	37.17	discover	120	62.83
2	literal phrasal verb	194	set up	145	74.74	establish	49	25.26
3	literal phrasal verb	179	show up	97	54.19	appear	82	45.81
4	literal phrasal verb	185	check out	143	77.30	examine	42	22.70
5	literal phrasal verb	173	close down	144	83.24	shut	29	16.76
6	literal phrasal verb	179	put on	61	34.08	wear	118	65.92
7	literal phrasal verb	156	come over	36	23.08	visit	120	76.92
8	literal phrasal verb	160	call out	107	66.88	shout	53	33.12
9	literal phrasal verb	135	pick out	29	21.48	choose	106	78.52
10	literal phrasal verb	147	build up	57	38.78	increase	90	61.22
11	figurative phrasal verb	179	go on	38	21.23	happen	141	78.77
12	figurative phrasal verb	187	give up	139	74.33	stop	48	25.67
13	figurative phrasal verb	99	figure out	23	23.23	understand	76	76.77
14	figurative phrasal verb	149	go ahead	33	22.15	begin	116	77.85
15	figurative phrasal verb	126	hang up	105	83.33	end a call	21	16.67
16	figurative phrasal verb	181	break up	126	69.61	end	55	30.39

Items	Types of multi-word units	Possibilities for selecting word units (number of participants who recognized the meanings of each multi-word unit and its single-word equivalent)	Word selection					
			Multi-word units			Single-word equivalents		
			Words	No. of selections	%	Words	No. of selections	%
17	figurative phrasal verb	177	hang out	91	51.41	spend time	86	48.59
18	figurative phrasal verb	97	fill out	36	37.11	write information	61	62.89
19	figurative phrasal verb	147	carry on	59	40.14	continue	88	59.86
20	figurative phrasal verb	149	stand out	78	52.35	be more impressive	71	47.65
21	idiom	94	keep in mind	26	27.66	remember	68	72.34
22	idiom	139	keep in touch	36	25.90	contact	103	74.10
23	idiom	141	give someone a break	111	78.72	stop put pressure on someone	30	21.28
24	idiom	114	put on hold	36	31.58	stop	78	68.42
25	idiom	56	up in the air	13	23.21	unsure	43	76.79
26	idiom	160	keep an eye on	65	40.62	watch	95	59.38
27	idiom	58	draw the line	10	17.24	refuse	48	82.76
28	idiom	68	off the top of my head	11	16.18	in my memory	57	83.82
29	idiom	50	make up one's mind	13	26.00	decide	37	74.00
30	idiom	60	down the road	8	13.33	in the future	52	86.67
31	compound word	56	bottom line	8	14.29	important thing	48	85.71
32	compound word	177	eye contact	160	90.40	meet people's eyes	17	9.60
33	compound word	154	heart attack	141	91.56	heart failure	13	8.44
34	compound word	183	soft drink	162	88.52	alcohol-free drink	21	11.48
35	compound word	168	black sheep	120	71.43	shameful person	48	28.57
36	compound word	81	helping hand	15	18.52	support	66	81.48

Items	Types of multi-word units	Possibilities for selecting word units (number of participants who recognized the meanings of each multi-word unit and its single-word equivalent)	Word selection					
			Multi-word units			Single-word equivalents		
			Words	No. of selections	%	Words	No. of selections	%
37	compound word	191	high school	181	94.76	school for grade 10 th -12 th	10	5.24
38	compound word	166	dark horse	136	81.93	unexpected winner	30	18.07
39	compound word	109	real estate	61	55.96	land and building	48	44.04
40	compound word	194	living room	173	89.18	sitting room	21	10.82
Total		5609		3104	55.34		2505	44.66

The data in the table above presented that out of 5,609 possibilities of selecting word units, the learners chose the multi-word units more so than the single-word units. The multi-word units were selected for a total of 3,104 times (55.34%), while the single-word units were selected 2,505 times (44.66%). There were nineteen items in which the learners selected the multi-word options over their single-word equivalents. They are all listed below:

- Item 2 “set up” (74.74% chose multi-word options);
- Item 3 “show up” (54.19% chose multi-word options);
- Item 4 “check out” (77.30% chose multi-word options);
- Item 5 “close down” (83.24% chose multi-word options);
- Item 8 “call out” (66.88% chose multi-word options);
- Item 12 “give up” (74.33% chose multi-word options);
- Item 15 “hang up” (83.33% chose multi-word options);
- Item 16 “break up” (69.61% chose multi-word options);
- Item 17 “hang out” (51.41% chose multi-word options);
- Item 20 “stand out” (52.35% chose multi-word options);
- Item 23 “give someone a break” (78.72% chose multi-word options);
- Item 32 “eye contact” (90.40% chose multi-word options);
- Item 33 “heart attack” (91.56% chose multi-word options);
- Item 34 “soft drink” (88.52% chose multi-word options);
- Item 35 “black sheep” (71.43% chose multi-word options);
- Item 37 “high school” (94.76% chose multi-word options);
- Item 38 “dark horse” (81.93% chose multi-word options);
- Item 39 “real estate” (55.96% chose multi-word options); and
- Item 40 “living room” (89.18% chose multi-word options)

However, there were twenty-one items in which the learners selected the single-word options over their multi-word equivalents. They are composed as below:

- Item 1 “*discovery*” (62.83% chose single-word options);
- Item 6 “*wear*” (65.92% chose single-word options);
- Item 7 “*visit*” (76.92% chose single-word options);
- Item 9 “*choose*” (78.52% chose single-word options);
- Item 10 “*increase*” (61.22% chose single-word options);
- Item 11 “*happen*” (78.77% chose single-word options);
- Item 13 “*understand*” (76.77% chose single-word options);
- Item 14 “*begin*” (78.85% chose single-word options);
- Item 18 “*write information*” (62.89% chose single-word options);
- Item 19 “*continue*” (59.86% chose single-word options);
- Item 21 “*remember*” (72.34% chose single-word options);
- Item 22 “*contact*” (74.10 % chose single-word options);
- Item 24 “*stop*” (68.42% chose single-word options);
- Item 25 “*unsure*” (76.79% chose single-word options);
- Item 26 “*watch*” (59.38% chose single-word options);
- Item 27 “*refuse*” (82.76% chose single-word options);
- Item 28 “*in my memory*” (83.82% chose single-word options);
- Item 29 “*decide*” (74.00% chose single-word options);
- Item 30 “*in the future*” (86.67% chose single-word options);
- Item 31 “*important thing*” (85.71% chose single-word options); and
- Item 36 “*support*” (81.48% chose single-word options)

Table 2
Percentages of the learners’ selection of single-word and multi-word units across each category of multi-word units

Types of multi-word units	Possibilities for selecting word units (number of participants who recognized the meanings of the multi-word units and their single-word equivalents)	Number of selection			
		Multi-word units		Single-word equivalents	
		No. of selections	Percentage	No. of selections	Percentage
Literal phrasal verbs	1699	890	52.38	809	47.62
Figurative phrasal verbs	1491	728	48.83	763	51.17
Idioms	940	329	35.00	611	65.00
Compound words	1479	1157	78.23	322	21.77

When the multi-word units were grouped into four different types: literal phrasal verbs, figurative phrasal verbs, idioms, and compound words, the results indicated that “literal phrasal verbs” (52.38%) and “compound words” (78.23%) were selected the most over their single-word equivalents. However, “figurative phrasal verbs” (48.83%) and “idioms” (35.00%) were selected less so compared to their single-word equivalents.

Research Question 2: Are there any significant differences between the learners' single-word and multi-word unit selection?

In order to explore the differences between the learners' selection of single-word and multi-word units as iterated in RQ2, a paired t-test was applied. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Comparison of the learners' selections of single-word and multi-word units

Word types	n	\bar{x}	SD	t	Sig.
multi-word units	40	77.60	54.66	1.205	.236
single-word units	40	62.63	33.91		

The data indicated that there was no significant difference between the learners' selection of multi-word units (\bar{x} = 77.60, SD = 54.66) and single-word units (\bar{x} = 62.63, SD = 33.91); $t(39) = 1.205$ and $p = .236$.

Table 4
Comparison of the learners' selections of single-word and multi-word units across each category of multi-word units

	word types	n	\bar{x}	SD	t	Sig.
literal phrasal verbs	multi-word units	10	89.00	44.73	.328	.750
	single-word units	10	80.90	35.20		
figurative phrasal verbs	multi-word units	10	72.80	41.40	-.162	.875
	single-word units	10	76.30	34.27		
idioms	multi-word units	10	32.90	32.68	-2.222	.053
	single-word units	10	61.10	24.46		
compound words	multi-word units	10	115.70	64.51	3.231	.010*
	single-word units	10	32.20	18.97		

* Significant at the .05 level

Among four types of multi-word units, there was a significant difference between the learners' selection of compound nouns (\bar{x} = 115.70, SD = 64.51) and single-word units (\bar{x} = 32.20, SD = 18.97); $t(39) = 3.231$ and $p = .01$. Apart from that, however, there were no significant differences between their selections of the other three multi-word types and their single word equivalents, i.e.:

- 1) literal phrasal verbs (\bar{x} = 89.00, SD = 44.73) and single-word units (\bar{x} = 80.90, SD = 35.20); $t(9) = .328$ and $p = .750$,

- 2) figurative phrasal verbs ($\bar{x} = 72.80$, $SD = 41.40$) and single-word units ($\bar{x} = 76.30$, $SD = 34.27$); $t(9) = -.162$ and $p = .875$, and
- 3) idioms ($\bar{x} = 32.90$, $SD = 32.68$) and single-word units ($\bar{x} = 61.10$, $SD = 24.46$); $t(9) = -2.222$ and $p = .053$.

Research Question 3: What are the reasons for the learners' selection of such word units?

In order to address RQ3 above, the learners' responses to the avoidance and preference questionnaire were tabulated and exhibited in Table 5 below.

Table 5
The learners' reasons for selecting multi-word units

Items	Multi-word units	Number of students who selected the multi-word units	Frequency of given reasons by the learners (%)									
			Avoidance				Preference					
			Inconfident to use a word with difficult structure	Unsure of the meaning of other words	Inconfident to use a long word	Total	Familiar	Sound natural	Short word	Demonstrate language ability	Easy to understand	Total
1	find out	71	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	62.16	16.22	2.70	0.00	18.92	100.00
2	set up	145	5.26	1.32	0.00	6.58	47.37	11.84	6.58	0.00	27.63	93.42
3	show up	97	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	60.78	9.80	5.88	0.00	23.53	100.00
4	check out	143	5.33	4.00	0.00	9.33	57.33	12.00	0.00	2.67	18.67	90.67
5	close down	144	1.32	1.32	0.00	2.63	50.00	18.42	2.63	0.00	26.32	97.37
6	put on	61	0.00	3.13	0.00	3.13	65.63	15.63	0.00	9.38	6.25	96.88
7	come over	36	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	47.37	21.05	0.00	10.53	21.05	100.00
8	call out	107	0.00	5.36	0.00	5.36	67.86	7.14	1.79	1.79	16.07	94.64
9	pick out	29	13.33	6.67	0.00	20.00	33.33	33.33	0.00	0.00	13.33	80.00
10	build up	57	16.67	6.67	0.00	23.33	36.67	26.67	3.33	3.33	6.67	76.67
11	go on	38	0.00	10.00	0.00	10.00	50.00	5.00	10.00	5.00	20.00	90.00
12	give up	139	0.00	2.74	0.00	2.74	71.23	9.59	1.37	2.74	12.33	97.26
13	figure out	23	8.33	0.00	0.00	8.33	58.33	16.67	0.00	0.00	16.67	91.67
14	go ahead	33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	52.94	17.65	5.88	11.76	11.76	100.00
15	hang up	105	0.00	1.82	0.00	1.82	65.45	18.18	5.45	0.00	9.09	98.18
16	break up	126	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	72.73	9.09	3.03	1.52	13.64	100.00
17	hang out	91	4.17	0.00	0.00	4.17	68.75	10.42	0.00	2.08	14.58	95.83
18	fill out	36	5.26	0.00	0.00	5.26	31.58	31.58	0.00	0.00	31.58	94.74
19	carry on	59	3.23	0.00	0.00	3.23	70.97	9.68	3.23	0.00	12.90	96.77
20	stand out	78	9.76	0.00	2.44	12.20	53.66	12.20	9.76	2.44	9.76	87.80
21	keep in mind	26	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	50.00	34.62	0.00	7.69	7.69	100.00
22	keep in touch	36	5.26	0.00	0.00	5.26	68.42	5.26	0.00	10.53	10.53	94.74

Items	Multi-word units	Number of students who selected the multi-word units	Frequency of given reasons by the learners (%)									
			Avoidance				Preference					
			Inconfident to use a word with difficult structure	Unsure of the meaning of other words	Inconfident to use a long word	Total	Familiar	Sound natural	Short word	Demonstrate language ability	Easy to understand	Total
23	give someone a break	111	8.62	5.17	0.00	13.79	41.38	20.69	3.45	3.45	17.24	86.21
24	put on hold	36	5.26	0.00	0.00	5.26	52.63	26.32	0.00	5.26	10.53	94.74
25	up in the air	13	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	38.46	15.38	0.00	15.38	30.77	100.00
26	keep an eye on	65	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	41.18	23.53	2.94	20.59	11.76	100.00
27	draw the line	10	20.00	10.00	0.00	30.00	50.00	10.00	0.00	10.00	0.00	70.00
28	off the top of my head	11	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	27.27	45.45	0.00	18.18	9.09	100.00
29	make up one's mind	13	7.69	0.00	0.00	7.69	30.77	30.77	0.00	7.69	23.08	92.31
30	down the road	8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	62.50	37.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
31	bottom line	8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	87.50	12.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
32	eye contact	160	2.38	0.00	1.19	3.57	80.95	4.76	0.00	0.00	10.71	96.43
33	heart attack	141	2.70	2.70	1.35	6.76	51.35	17.57	0.00	4.05	20.27	93.24
34	soft drink	162	0.00	1.18	0.00	1.18	75.29	8.24	4.71	0.00	10.59	98.82
35	black sheep	120	1.59	6.35	1.59	9.52	47.62	9.52	3.17	4.76	25.40	90.48
36	helping hand	15	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	46.67	20.00	0.00	0.00	33.33	100.00
37	high school	181	1.05	0.00	0.00	1.05	65.26	6.32	4.21	2.11	21.05	98.95
38	dark horse	136	4.23	4.23	0.00	8.45	57.75	11.27	1.41	4.23	16.90	91.55
39	real estate	61	0.00	6.25	0.00	6.25	65.63	6.25	0.00	9.38	12.50	93.76
40	living room	173	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	76.92	4.40	2.20	0.00	16.48	100.00
total			3.29	1.97	0.16	5.42	56.04	16.56	2.09	4.41	15.47	94.58

The learners' responses to the avoidance and preference questionnaire showed that 94.58% of all learners selected the multi-word units due to their own preference, and only 5.42% of them was due to avoidance. Upon a closer look at the reasons given by the learners, it was found that the highest percentage of learners chose the reason *"familiar"* (56.04%), followed by the following reasons (in descending order): *"sound natural"* (16.56%), *"easy to understand"* (15.47%), *"demonstrate language ability"* (4.41%), *"inconfident to use a word with difficult structure"* (3.29%), *"short word"* (2.09%), *"unsure of the meaning of other words"* (1.97%), and *"inconfident to use a long word"* (0.16%).

Upon consideration of the learners' responses to each word items, the results showed that all of their reasons tended to reflect their preference more than their avoidance. Furthermore, they chose the reason "familiar" was chosen for a majority of the items, with thirty-six of them being the following: Item 1 "find out", Item 2 "set up", Item 3 "show up", Item 4 "check out", Item 5 "close down", Item 6 "put on", Item 7 "come over", Item 8 "call out", Item 10 "build up", Item 11 "go on", Item 12 "give up", Item 13 "find out", Item 14 "go ahead", Item 15 "hang up", Item 16 "break up", Item 17 "hang out", Item 19 "carry on", Item 20 "stand out", Item 21 "keep in mind", Item 22 "keep in touch", Item 23 "give someone a break", Item 24 "put on hold", Item 25 "up in the air", Item 26 "keep an eye on", Item 27 "draw the line", Item 30 "down the road", Item 31 "bottom line", Item 32 "eye contact", Item 33 "heart attack", Item 34 "soft drink", Item 35 "black sheep", Item 36 "helping hand", Item 37 "high school", Item 38 "dark horse", Item 39 "real estate", and Item 40 "living room". For Item 9 "pick out", and Item 29 "make up one's mind", the reasons "familiar" and "sound natural" were chosen equally. For Item 18 "fill out", the reasons "familiar", "sound natural", and "easy to understand" were chosen equally. Lastly, for Item 28 "off the top of my head", the reason "sound natural" had the most responses.

For the learners' selections of single-word units, their responses to the avoidance and preference questionnaire are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6
The learners' reasons for selecting single-word units

Items	Single-word equivalents	Number of students who selected the single-word units	Frequency of given reasons by the learners (%)								
			Avoidance				Preference				
			Inconfident to use a word with difficult structure	Unsure of the meaning of other words	Inconfident to use a long word	Total	Familiar	Sound natural	Short word	Demonstrate language ability	Easy to understand
1	discover	120	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	66.67	17.46	0.00	7.94	7.94
2	establish	49	3.85	3.85	0.00	7.70	57.69	11.54	0.00	15.38	7.69
3	appear	82	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	74.42	9.30	2.33	6.98	6.98
4	examine	42	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	59.09	18.18	0.00	9.09	13.64
5	shut	29	6.67	0.00	0.00	6.67	46.67	6.67	26.67	0.00	13.33
6	wear	118	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	72.58	6.45	8.06	0.00	12.90
7	visit	120	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	68.25	7.94	4.76	1.59	17.46
8	shout	53	3.57	0.00	0.00	3.57	53.57	14.29	10.71	0.00	17.86
9	choose	106	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	62.50	10.71	5.36	5.36	16.07
10	increase	90	6.38	4.26	0.00	10.64	55.32	14.89	2.13	6.38	10.64
11	happen	141	0.00	1.35	0.00	1.35	77.03	4.05	1.35	0.00	16.22
12	stop	48	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	64.00	8.00	4.00	0.00	24.00
13	understand	76	2.50	0.00	0.00	2.50	65.00	2.50	0.00	2.50	27.50
14	begin	116	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	73.77	3.28	4.92	1.64	16.39
15	end a call	21	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	54.55	18.18	9.09	0.00	18.18
16	end	55	3.45	0.00	0.00	3.45	58.62	17.24	13.79	3.45	3.45
17	spend time	86	0.00	2.22	0.00	2.22	57.78	11.11	0.00	2.22	26.67
18	write information	61	6.25	0.00	0.00	6.25	62.50	12.50	3.13	0.00	15.63
19	continue	88	2.17	0.00	0.00	2.17	73.91	8.70	4.35	2.17	8.70
20	be more impressive	71	8.11	5.41	5.41	18.92	13.51	35.14	2.70	8.11	21.62
21	remember	68	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	83.82	7.35	1.47	1.47	5.88
22	contact	103	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	77.78	7.41	3.70	0.00	11.11
23	stop put pressure on someone	30	6.25	12.50	0.00	18.75	25.00	31.25	0.00	25.00	0.00
24	stop	78	2.44	0.00	0.00	2.44	73.17	2.44	0.00	0.00	21.95
25	unsure	43	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	51.16	6.98	6.98	2.33	32.56
26	watch	95	0.00	0.00	2.00	2.00	82.00	2.00	4.00	0.00	10.00
27	refuse	48	8.33	2.08	0.00	10.42	54.17	2.08	8.33	0.00	25.00

Items	Single-word equivalents	Number of students who selected the single-word units	Frequency of given reasons by the learners (%)									
			Avoidance				Preference					
			Inconfident to use a word with difficult structure	Unsure of the meaning of other words	Inconfident to use a long word	Total	Familiar	Sound natural	Short word	Demonstrate language ability	Easy to understand	Total
28	in my memory	57	1.75	1.75	1.75	5.26	77.19	5.26	0.00	3.51	8.77	94.74
29	decide	37	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	70.27	2.70	8.11	0.00	18.92	100.00
30	in the future	52	1.92	0.00	0.00	1.92	59.62	9.62	0.00	0.00	28.85	98.08
31	important thing	48	0.00	4.17	2.08	6.25	68.75	14.58	0.00	2.08	8.33	93.75
32	meet people's eyes	17	0.00	11.11	0.00	11.11	33.33	55.56	0.00	0.00	0.00	88.89
33	heart failure	13	14.29	0.00	0.00	14.29	28.57	28.57	0.00	14.29	14.29	85.71
34	alcohol-free drink	21	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	81.82	0.00	0.00	9.09	9.09	100.00
35	shameful person	48	12.00	4.00	0.00	16.00	24.00	32.00	4.00	16.00	8.00	84.00
36	support	66	1.52	0.00	0.00	1.52	74.24	6.06	1.52	0.00	16.67	98.48
37	school for grade 10 th -12 th	10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	40.00	0.00	0.00	60.00	100.00
38	unexpected winner	30	0.00	6.67	0.00	6.67	33.33	26.67	6.67	20.00	6.67	93.33
39	land and building	48	8.00	4.00	0.00	12.00	44.00	24.00	4.00	8.00	8.00	88.00
40	sitting room	21	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	63.64	18.18	0.00	9.09	9.09	100.00
total			2.49	1.58	0.28	4.35	58.08	14.02	3.80	4.59	15.15	95.65

The learners' responses to the avoidance and preference questionnaire revealed that 95.65% of their responses for selecting the single-word units was due to their own preference, and only 4.35% was due to their avoidance. When each reason given by the learners was considered, it was shown that their most frequently given reason was "*familiar*" (58.08%), followed by "*easy to understand*" (15.15%), "*sound natural*" (14.02%), "*demonstrate language ability*" (4.59%), "*short word*" (3.80%), "*inconfident to use a word with difficult structure*" (2.49%), "*unsure of the meaning of other words*" (1.58%), and "*inconfident to use a long word*" (0.28%).

When the learners' responses to each word item were analyzed, they indicated a tendency to choose reasons which reflected their preference more than their avoidance for all items (Items 1-40). The reason "*familiar*" was, again, the most frequently given reason among the learners for thirty-four items, i.e., Item 1 "*discover*", Item 2 "*establish*", Item 3 "*appear*", Item 4 "*examine*", Item 5 "*shut*", Item 6 "*wear*", Item 7 "*visit*", Item 8 "*shout*", Item 9 "*choose*", Item 10 "*increase*", Item 11 "*happen*", Item 12 "*stop*", Item 13 "*understand*", Item 14 "*begin*", Item 15 "*end a call*", Item 16 "*end*", Item 17 "*spend time*", Item 18 "*write information*", Item 19 "*continue*", Item 21 "*remember*", Item 22 "*contact*", Item 24 "*stop*", Item 25 "*unsure*", Item 26 "*watch*", Item 27 "*refuse*", Item 28 "*in my memory*", Item 29 "*decide*", Item 30 "*in the future*", Item 31 "*important thing*", Item 34 "*alcohol-free drink*", Item 36 "*support*", Item 38 "*unexpected winner*", Item 39 "*land and building*", and Item 40 "*sitting room*". For Item 20 "*be more impressive*", Item 23 "*stop put pressure on someone*", Item 32 "*meet people's eyes*", and Item 35 "*shameful person*", their most frequently given reason was "*sound natural*". For Item 37 "*school for grade 10th-12th*", their most frequently given reason was "*easy to understand*". Finally, for Item 33 "*heart failure*", the reasons "*familiar*" and "*sound natural*" were chosen equally.

DISCUSSION

The learners' word choice: Single-word and multi-word units

The findings revealed that in total, the learners selected the multi-word units more than the single-word units in their English language production. This is surprising as it is not in line with the previous studies (Barekat & Baniasady, 2014; El-Dakhs, 2016; Kosolsombat & Pongpairaj, 2017). Their results showed that learners tended to use the single-word units more so than multi-word units. Particularly, Barekat and Baniasady (2014) explained that the learners' underuse of phrasal verbs (a type of multi-word units) was derived from the structural differences between Persian and English, and the semantic complexity of English phrasal verbs. Based on El-Dakhs's (2016) research, there were three factors affecting their use of phrasal verbs: L1-L2 structural differences, passive learning for comprehension, and limited language exposure. Pongpairaj and Kosolsombat (2017) also pointed out that their low level of use of phrasal verbs was caused by the semantic complexity of English phrasal verbs. According to the findings of this study, the cause of the learners' high selection of multi-word units might be due to their high exposure to the English language. Since the learners are studying in Phuket, a popular tourist destination in Thailand, they have plenty of opportunities to connect with a large number of foreigners, which may have helped them familiarize themselves with natural uses and forms of the language. In other words, they would also regularly have chances to encounter multi-word units in a natural setting. Hence, they did not have as many problems with the use of the multi-word units in their language production compared to the learners in previous studies.

However, based on the results of the t-test, there was no significant difference between the learners' selection of the multi-word units and their single-word equivalents. It implies that even though the learners tended to choose the multi-word units more than the single-word units, there was not a big gap between their selections of those two word types. It is possible that the level of their language exposure may not be effective enough yet to be translated to active uses of multi-word units in their language production.

In terms of language proficiency levels, it seems that their selection of single-word and multi-word units did not depend on learners' proficiency levels. The participants in this study who had achieved proficiency levels between intermediate (B1) and upper-intermediate (B2) preferred selecting the multi-word units more than their single-word equivalents. This is in contrast to Barekat and Baniasady's (2014) study which revealed that intermediate learners were likely to choose single-word units more than the multi-word units anyway. According to Boontong's (2015) study, intermediate learners also tended to choose single-word units more so than multi-word units; however, upper-intermediate learners would choose single-word and multi-word units equally. Therefore, it can be concluded that their language proficiency levels were not related or had no effect on the learners' word selection.

When we considered each category of the multi-word units, the results showed that there was no consistency in use. There were two categories: "*literal phrasal verbs*" and "*compound words*" that were selected by over half of the learners in their language production. This was

starkly different from the categories, “*figurative phrasal verbs*” and “*idioms*”, where most learners were not likely to choose them; even though they knew their meanings. Thus, the findings about learners’ low level of use of “*figurative phrasal verbs*” and “*idioms*” were consistent with Becker’s (2014), Laufer’s (2000), and Pongpaiboj and Kosolsombat’s (2017) studies. Becker’s (2014) and Pongpaiboj and Kosolsombat’s (2017) studies particularly found that the language learners used the multi-word units “*figurative phrasal verbs*” less so than the single-word verbs. According to Laufer’s (2000) study, among the four idiom types, “*partial translation*” and “*L1 non idioms*” were used the least in their language production. Based on these previously mentioned studies, the reason for the learners’ low-level use of multi-word units was due to a high degree of L1-L2 differences. Thus, the cause of the learners’ low level of use of “*figurative phrasal verbs*”, and “*idioms*” found in the present study might be the same as in the prior research.

The effect of avoidance and preference on the learners’ selection of single-word and multi-word units

In Tables 5 and 6, the results revealed that the learners chose the multi-word and single-word units because of their preference. However, several studies showed that learners tended to avoid using multi-word units (Barekat & Baniasady, 2014; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Okuwaki, 2021; Pongpaiboj & Kosolsombat, 2017). According to the present study’s findings, the learners were not likely to apply the avoidance strategy when selecting the two word types (single-word and multi-word units). Instead, they showed their preference in selecting them. As mentioned in Boontong’s (2015) study, learners with higher proficiency would be able to use single-word and multi-word units in language production freely; their high level of language knowledge would facilitate them in switching between their use of single-word and multi-word units. After all, a “higher proficiency allows for an alternation between the two verb types” (Boontong, 2015, p. 27). Hence, avoidance might not always be the cause of their selection of single-word and multi-word units, but preference could be the cause as well.

When each item of the avoidance and preference questionnaire was analyzed, the learners primarily selected multi-word units because the words were “familiar” to them, followed by the reasons “*sound natural*”, and “*easy to understand*”. Very similarly, they also primarily selected single-word units because they were “familiar” to them, followed again by the same reasons, “*easy to understand*” and “*sound natural*”. It is implied that their preference primarily affected the learners’ selection of the two word types. As a result, teachers must be aware of learners’ preferences for word choices in their language production and more attention should be paid to the three most common reasons that would determine learners’ selections of single-word and multi-word units, i.e., “*familiar*”, “*sound natural*”, and “*easy to understand*”. Additionally, teachers should also find a way to minimize learners’ avoidance of word choices as it would help learners gain courage to use a wider variety of words in their language production.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the learners’ selection of single-word and multi-word units in their English language production and their reasons for selecting single-word and multi-word

units. Surprisingly, the results showed that the learners as a whole chose multi-word units more so than the single-word units. When we consider the individual categories of the multi-word units, the learners chose the literal phrasal verbs and compound words more than their single-word equivalents. However, the figurative phrasal verbs and idioms were chosen less in comparison. According to the *t*-test results, overall, there was no significant difference between the learners' selection of the single-word and multi-word units. The learners' responses to avoidance & preference questionnaires also reflected their preference for the use of both word types (single-word and multi-word units) more so than their avoidance. When each reason for selecting words was considered, it was found that the most frequently given reason for the learners' selection of single-word and multi-word units was "*familiar*", which again reflected their preference.

According to these findings, they revealed the learners' learning styles in terms of their preference for and avoidance of using single-word and multi-word units in their language production. This information will help teachers understand what fosters learners to use both types of words (single-word and multi-word units) in language and what inhibits them to use such word units in language. Based on the findings found in this study, teachers will be able to find the effective teaching methods for developing learners' use of both single word and multi-word units in their English language production.

Recommendations for further studies

Since the English proficiency of the participants in this study was about the same level (between intermediate and upper-intermediate level), we do not know whether participants with different language levels will select the types of words differently or similarly. Moreover, based on their language levels, their reasons for selecting the word types may not be the same. According to the format of the comprehension test, there were four possible answers for each question. The extra option "*I do not know*" should be added to reduce hedged responses. In addition, the avoidance and preference questionnaire has a limited number of preference and avoidance reasons on selecting word types (single-word and multi-word units). Adding more reasons such as "*lack knowledge of how to collocate it*", and "*hard to say*" could further confirm the accuracy of this present study's findings and contribute to new research findings.

Therefore, future research may explore the effects of avoidance and preference on selecting single-word and multi-word units for learners with different language levels. To improve the quality of the research instruments used in this study, the option "*I do not know*" should be made available in the comprehension test and more reasons for selecting word types should be added in the avoidance and preference questionnaire.

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