

Challenges in Teaching Prepositions in a Language Classroom

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Abstract

This research deals with English prepositions and the difficulties English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face while they master prepositions. The researchers also intend to identify the needs of English teachers who wish to improve their teaching skills through a better explanation of prepositions by giving them some practical tips. The participants in this research were 50 teachers. Data were collected through questionnaires done with English teachers from Albania, Greece and Kosovo. The aim of the questionnaires was to discover if the teachers taught prepositions in the class or not. The research findings revealed that most of the EFL teachers teach what's in the textbook or they just do not explain prepositions at all. Most of the teachers felt that English prepositions are difficult to teach to nonnative speakers, for many reasons: 1. polysemy of prepositions, where different meanings change according to the context in which prepositions are used; 2. lack of a spoken and written guide on how to use prepositions; 3. native language interference. At the end of article the authors provide multiple activities concerning prepositions, their acquisition and their usage.

Keywords: prepositions, EFL students, native language interference, acquisition

Introduction

Prepositions in English are a well-known challenge for learners of English as a second language, as they are one of the most problematic areas (Lindstromberg, 1991 and Capel, 1993).

The English preposition is usually defined as a word that connects a noun to other words and shows the relationship between them (Collins Cobuild English guides, 1998). Prepositions are very confusing and sometimes hardly understandable even for native speakers, and when it comes to EFL students the problem is much bigger, because they have to understand all the nuances of the English prepositions, to memorize them and to properly use them.

Problem of Research

Despite these challenges, prepositions are hardly addressed in the current teaching methods. Teachers often find prepositions hard to teach. Sometimes when they want to explain a preposition they use one or two other prepositions to give the definition. So they have to give the definitions of the other prepositions used. The situation described is not only confusing for teachers but also for the students, who find themselves in a "pool" of prepositions with still vague meanings. Many English course books have just a general overview of prepositions and do not provide specific rules on their usage. So most of the time important aspects of the acquisition of prepositions are not mentioned at all, such as when a certain preposition has more than one meaning depending on the context it is used in. Also, there is a lack of information about which verbs or nouns require a certain preposition.

Generally prepositions are studied in isolation, by some general rules and followed by examples. In English, prepositions appear as adjuncts, they mark the arguments of predicates, and they combine with other parts of speech to express new meanings (Schrapfer Azar, B, 1989). This paper presents ongoing work on the difficulties EFL students face while they master English prepositions.

Focus of research

The aim of the present study is to identify the needs of English teachers and the difficulties they face while they teach or explain English prepositions. This paper is intended to help teachers understand the benefits of teaching prepositions by providing multiple examples of prepositions' usage within a given context. It stresses the importance of ensuring that EFL learners are exposed to prepositions because the more EFL learners are exposed to prepositions, the better they will acquire their common and fine shades of meanings.

Methodology of Research

Study Questions

Based on review of the literature and previous studies done in this area, this study aims at shedding some light on the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers teach prepositions?
2. To what extent is the usage of prepositions affected by EFL learners' mother tongue (L 1)?
3. How can teachers improve their teaching skills when they teach prepositions?

This study, without pretending to be exhaustive, also aims to analyze the difficulties that students encounter while they master English prepositions.

Literature Review

According to Quirk et al. (1993), prepositions express a relationship between entities: they indicate a relationship in space (between one object and another), and/or a relationship in time (between events), in addition to other relationships such as instrument and cause.

Prepositions can be classified according to their form, function and meaning (Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D., 1999). As far as the form is concerned, prepositions can be simple (one-word preposition), or complex (also called two-word, three-word, or compound prepositions) (Celce-Murcia, & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Simple prepositions are closed class, meaning that we can not invent new single word prepositions. However, complex prepositions are open class because new combinations could be invented (Yates. 1991). In English, there are approximately seventy simple prepositions. The most frequently used are: at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to and with (Grubic, 2004).

There are many reasons why learning English prepositions is notoriously difficult and a slow process for EFL students. English prepositions typically are short, single-syllable or two-syllable words that are seldom stressed when pronounced. They are often not articulated clearly or heard distinctly and are mostly written in lower case. Another problem is that prepositions are often conceptually different from one language to the other, so when it comes to translating them EFL students face many difficulties. For example, in English we say “go to work **by** car ,” whereas in Albanian we “go to work with a car (*shkoj në punë me makinë*).

Both sentences express the same meaning by making use of different prepositions.

Each language has its own set of grammar rules, so there are points of conflict when someone wants to learn a second language (James, 2007; Jie, 2008). Prepositions are frequently the most important aspect of these clash points. Usually prepositions come before the noun in English, but in some languages they come after, making them postpositions (Samara, 1999). In some languages, Albanian language included, the role of prepositions is often completed through the use of inflections (Demiraj. Sh.,1964). As a consequence, prepositions do not behave grammatically in the same way for each language.

There is a mismatch problem between English and other languages (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Usually when someone is learning a foreign language, he/she will try to define an English word by its native equivalent. When it comes to the usage of prepositions students try to translate the English preposition with the equivalent in his/her mother tongue. So beginners in English are likely to use a preposition which they translate from their mother tongue to the target language (English) and this is rarely the right one. So, an Albanian student will define *table* as *tavolinë*. Content words, like *table*, are easily grasped by students but if they try to find the right equivalent of function words, like prepositions, they face difficulties. If one tries to translate the preposition *on*, he/she will soon find out that this preposition has several meanings depending on the context used. Most of the times when students use prepositions when they are not needed are due to mother tongue interference. For instance an Albanian student will say *let's go at home* rather than *let's go home*, due to mother tongue interference since in the Albanian language a preposition is used to indicate they we are going *at* home.

The challenging task related to English prepositions is how they are, or rather how they are not taught in school books. Most of the English textbooks used by EFL students give little space to the explanation of prepositions, and when a spot is provided it is just a simple explanation of the preposition followed by 1-2 examples. The following textbooks *World Link* by Susan Stempliski, *Nancy Douglas & James R. Morgan*, *Grammar Sense* by Susan Bland,

Click On 1, Click On 2, Click On 3 by Virginia Evans & Neil O'Sullivan, and *Grammar Dimensions 3* by Stephen Thewlis do not mention prepositions at all, so teachers have difficulties when they explain them. Other textbooks such as *Inside Out* by Sue Kay, *Vaughan Jones & Philip Kerr Grammar Links* by Linda Butler, *Straightforward Intermediate and Upper Intermediate* by Philip Kerr & Ceri Jones only teach prepositions at certain levels and teach just two of their most common usages: spatial and temporal use.

Sample of Research

English Language Teachers Association Albania (ELTA) organized a training seminar for 300 teachers of Albania, Kosovo and Greece in Corfu, Greece. The questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were distributed at break time to a random sample of 50 teachers of the English language, who were selected to participate in this study. Ten of the selected teachers teach English as a foreign language (EFL) to primary school pupils, ten teachers teach EFL to secondary school students, 15 teachers teach private courses of English to adults, and 15 teachers teach English to University students. These teachers have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and they belong to different age groups.

Instrument and procedures

The research strategy was primarily quantitative. The teachers were randomly chosen since there were 300 teachers present from Albania, Kosovo and Greece. They found the questions very interesting and challenging.

After having examined all the answers provided in the questionnaires, it was concluded that almost all the teachers accepted the idea that it is important to focus more on grammar while explaining prepositions. They also emphasized English school books should have more information on prepositions used in different contexts.

The questionnaire was drafted with the help of Questionnaire Design, module 8 (Siniscalco, 2005). It consisted of 4 open-ended questions which took into consideration the interests and opinions of the teachers selected. The aim of these open-ended questions was to highlight the difficulties they encounter when they explain prepositions, the sources of errors and the causes of these errors. It also consisted of 6 general questions about teachers' academic backgrounds, and their knowledge about prepositions. The involvement of teachers in this study by means of a structured questionnaire was done for the purpose of providing a new approach to the object of this study. The last questions focused mainly on the methods they use in the classroom when they explain prepositions, their teaching aids, and the workshops they have recently attended or would like to attend in the future.

The questionnaires were distributed by the authors at break time so teachers had at their disposal all the time needed.

Data analyses In this section, the findings of this study are presented and discussed in light of the questions provided in the questionnaires.



Figure 1. Academic background

Figure 1 shows the results of the first question about the academic background of the teachers. So, out of 50 teachers 30 of them had a Bachelor degree in English language, 15 had a Master.s degree and just 5 of them had a PhD degree.

The results of the second question, concerning teaching experience in terms of years, shows that the majority of the teachers randomly selected were rather new teachers with an average experience of 10 years (**Figure 2**).

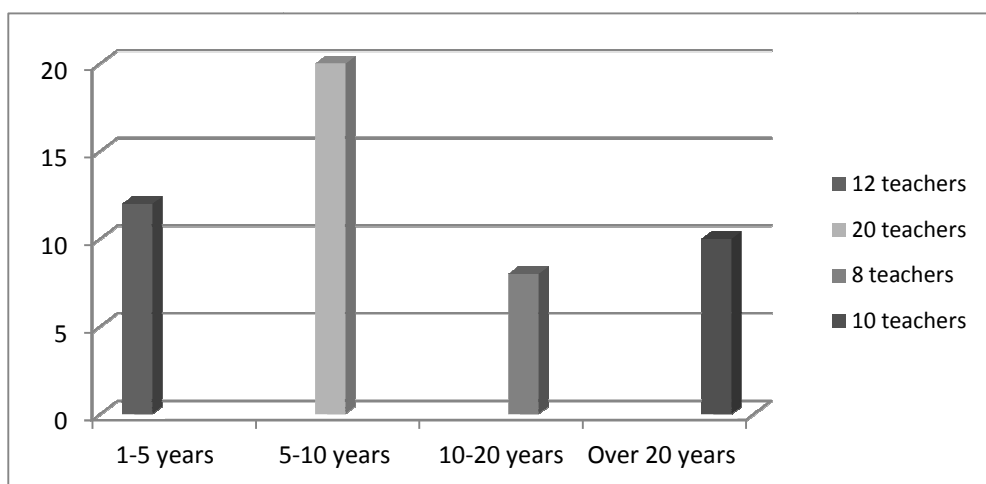


Figure 2. Teaching experience

Figure 3 shows the results of question 3 about the age level of the students these teachers teach. Most of the teachers taught in primary schools and or taught adults who want to learn English as a foreign language in private courses.

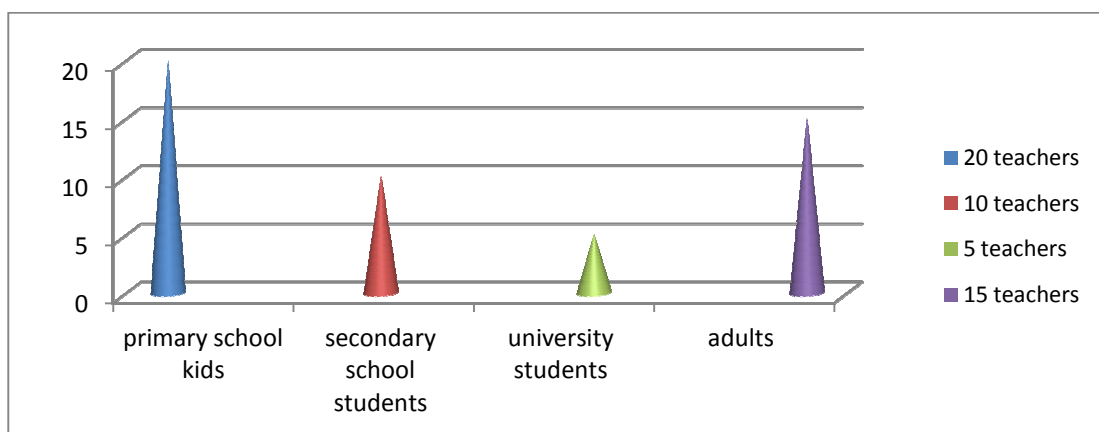


Figure 3. Age level of students taught

Table 1, the results of the 4th question, shows that the majority of the teachers answered “yes” when they were asked if prepositions were included in the grammar sections of the English textbooks used in their schools. The result of question 5- *if students faced difficulties while they mastered prepositions* - shows that the vast majority of the teachers answered yes (45 teachers).

50 teachers			
Question 4		Question 5	
Yes	No	Yes	No
30 teachers	20 teachers	45	5

Table 1. Results of question 4

The results of question 6 concerning the types of errors students make when they use a specific preposition are quite diverse. The types of errors frequently mentioned are:

- The student transfers a specific preposition from their native language into English (substitution);
- The student uses a preposition when it should not be used (addition);
- An obligatory preposition is omitted in some cases (omission).

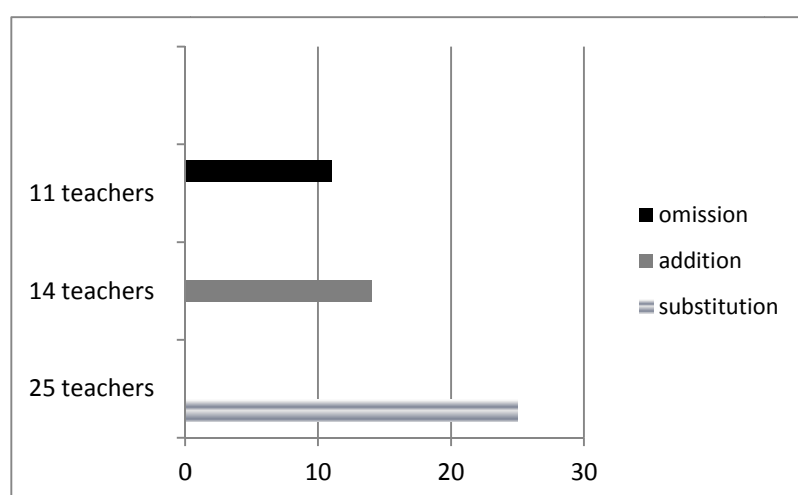


Figure 4. Types of errors.

Figure 4 shows that the transfer of a specific preposition is the most common error made by EFL students.

The results of question 7 about the sources of errors are as follows (Figure 5):

- A. interference of mother tongue;
- B. polysemy of English prepositions;
- C. lack of adequate explanation by the book;
- D. lack of sufficient explanation by the teacher;

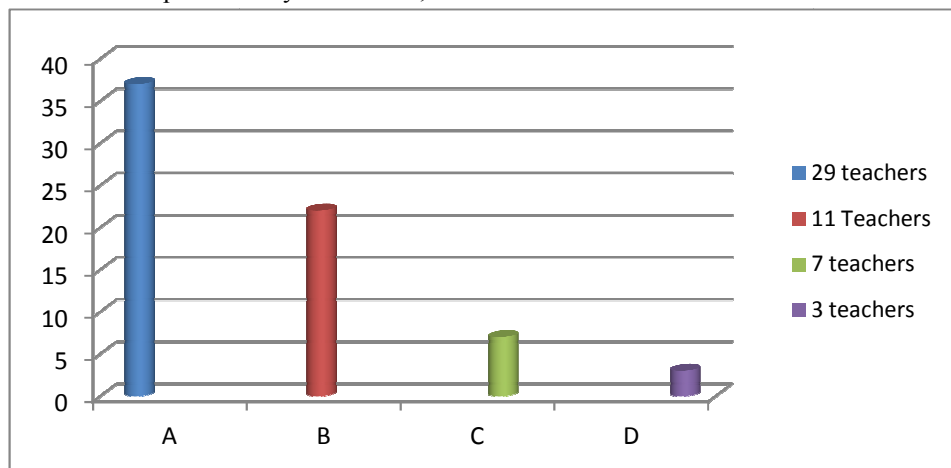


Figure 5 Sources of Errors

One of the most important questions of the questionnaire was: how do you teach prepositions. The findings are as follows:

- A. by providing examples
- B. by translating into mother tongue;
- C. by making an analogy with the mother tongue
- D. by using objects, pictures, cards, charts etc.
- E. by asking students to make sentences

The teachers provided detailed explanations for the above mentioned results. Most of them (45 teachers) gave 4 - 5 ways of teaching prepositions. 15 teachers provided just 2-3 ways of teaching prepositions and 5 teachers provided just one way of teaching prepositions.

Discussion

According to Celcia Murcia (2001), non-native speakers of English tend to have three types of problems with prepositions: choosing the wrong prepositions, omitting a needed preposition and using an extra preposition where one is not needed.

bearing in mind the results of the questionnaire and emphasizing the fact that English prepositions are rather difficult to acquire for non native speakers, some sources of errors in the usage of prepositions are listed in the following section. These sources of errors are attributed to the following reasons:

- A. **Interlingual transfer** refers to the interference of mother tongue to the target language Brown (Brown, 1987).
- B. **Intralingual transfer** where errors occur due to partial learning of the target language. So we can mention the **overgeneralization error**, which according to Brown (Brown, 1987) involves the incorrect application of the previously learned second language material to a present second language context. Also we can attribute intralingual transfer to the **ignorance of rule restriction** which according to Richards and Sampson means “applying rules to contexts to which they do not apply” (Richards and Sampson, 1974).
- C. **Context of Learning:** These sorts of errors are attributed to poor presentation of prepositions in texts, which in most cases do not mention prepositions at all. Brown states that “some textbook writers focus on some aspects of the language and neglect others according to their belief or experiences” Brown, 1987). Simple prepositions are more easily mastered by students compared to the complex prepositions so they receive little attention in grammar textbooks and other school text books. The exercises or examples for this particular category of prepositions are rare and that’s why teachers do not focus on these prepositions and do not use them extensively with their students.
- D. **Avoidance:** Sometimes students of EFL avoid the words or chunks of words, which they find difficult to acquire (Lightbown and Spada, 2003)
- E. **Guessing:** when students do not know or are in doubt about a specific preposition they try to guess the right one (Herskovits, Annette, 1998)

Recommendations

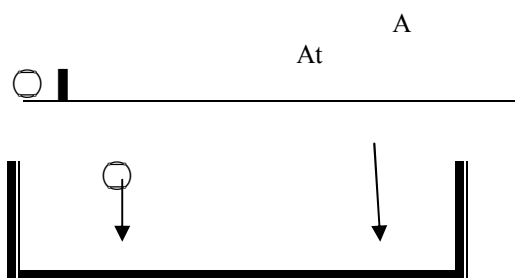
In the process of learning or teaching English, sometimes some seemingly simple but genuine problems come up which are a bit tricky or vague to explain. Prepositions are very tricky for student and even for EFL teachers. The goal of the teachers is to make students aware of these “little tiny” words and then to help them use the correct preposition in different contexts. It is very important that the teacher sees prepositions as logical and not an isolated part of speech. Prepositions make logical sense; if not the teacher should find a mental image to make them logical. They are mastered through memorization and practice. In order to facilitate the teacher’s job we will provide some tips on how to teach prepositions by giving some practical activities that may be used in EFL classes.

- A picture is worth a thousand words. So, how about using visual aids? Teachers can bring different pictures to illustrate the usage of specific prepositions. For example:
 - Flashcards – the teacher can download photos where specific prepositions like *on*, *in* and *at* are illustrated, for instance the pencil is *on* the table.
- Teachers can bring real objects in the class like apples, books, rulers, dusters etc. and can ask questions to the class: Where is the ruler?; Where is the book?
- Provide students with a diagram and an explanation regarding the meaning of these prepositions when teaching prepositions of place and direction e.g.

I'll meet AT the bus stop ON High Street.



He stopped AT the traffic light.



The money will be IN and envelope ON my desk

- Teachers should teach and test the really common prepositions like *at*, *in*, *on*, and *with* for beginners of English. They can do it in relation to a meaningful context like time or place; AT eleven o'clock, ON Saturday, IN August. For intermediate or advanced students, teachers can teach them as part of a chunk of language as for example consists OF, interested IN, good AT, in accordance with etc.
- Teachers may try to the use visual/active approach depending on the age and level of their students. They can get students to describe or act out an emergency event or they can describe their classes or their bedrooms. Students have to describe the position of furniture and equipment in their classrooms or their bedrooms.
- Teachers can assign class/home work with different exercises such as: filling in the missing preposition or circling the right preposition. They may also ask their students to write a description of their favorite place, to describe a birthday party, or to write a letter to a pen friend using at least 10 prepositions.

The last question of the questionnaire distributed to the 50 teachers had to do with further trainings, if they needed them or not. specifically teachers were asked if they needed further trainings on grammar and particularly on prepositions usage and most of the answers (39 teachers) were pro to the idea of having further trainings. 11 teachers wrote that trainings should be on broader topics rather than just on grammar.

Conclusions

The results of this study have revealed three main findings:

1. Types of errors made by students while they master English prepositions
2. Sources of errors
3. Ways of teaching prepositions

From the results gathered through the questionnaires distributed to 50 teachers, we can conclude that the students face challenging difficulties if they really want to master the correct usage of prepositions in different contexts.

More importantly, this study opens doors to an understanding of the degree of difficulty that the EFL teachers face when they deal with or try to teach English prepositions. It is important to focus more on practical activities rather than on providing our students pages of theoretical explanation regarding English prepositions.

It seems like the prepositions in English can be very difficult especially because they all seem to have many uses. Remembering all of them in both languages is not only a hard task but one that can be accomplished only with

time and practice.

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Appendix 1.

Please circle one of the alternatives provided or fill in the answers.

1. How many years of academic education have you completed?
 - A. Bachelor degree
 - B. Master degree
 - C. PhD Studies
 - D. Other (please specify)
2. How long have you been teaching English?
 - A. 1-5 years
 - B. 5-10 years
 - C. 10-20 years
 - D. Over 20 years
3. What age level do you teach:
 - A. Primary school kids
 - B. Secondary school students
 - C. University level students
 - D. Adults
4. Are prepositions included in the grammar spots of the English textbooks used in your school?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
5. Do your students face difficulties while they master prepositions?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
6. What types of errors do your students make while they use a specific preposition?
7. What are the causes of these errors?
8. How do you teach prepositions?
9. Do teachers need trainings on English grammar and particularly about the usage of prepositions?

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