The main difficulties in mastering the English language prepositions

*Avni Islami**

Abstract

The acquisition of the English language prepositions is not an easy task for foreigners who study English as a second or foreign language. This study specifies that mastering of English language prepositions is one of prerequisites to become skilled at English language fluency and accuracy. Firstly, this research paper discusses ways prepositions are used in English, and then reflects over some of the reasons why prepositions cause difficulties to English language learners. It also analyses the underlying system that governs prepositions and how this system might be represented to English language learners, by analyzing the current teaching pedagogy and suggests a possible adequate alternative. Accordingly, the paper examines the misuse of preposition by the students of the first grade of Economics at the AAB private college in Kosovo, and the students if the Faculty of Education at the Public University of Prishtina. The research showed that most of the students make repeated mistakes even with the most common used prepositions of time (in on and at) due to the influence of the first language and uncertainty it creates in producing an adequate statement with such prepositions. According to this research, I have concluded that the Economics students of the AAB College proved to make less error in using prepositions than the students of the Faculty of Education.

Key words: *acquisition, English prepositions, difficulties, time.*

* Avni Islami, PhD Cand., AAB College, E-mail: avni83up@hotmail.com

Introduction

Studying prepositions is not an easy task for ESL or foreign students due to their numerous alternatives and their polysemic nature of their meanings. This is because prepositions pose a big challenge to English language learners. It is highly important that teachers develop effective instructional methods. In such cases, English language instructors should take effective and serious steps to apply sophisticated methodologies in order to overcome them easily and provide real understanding among heterogeneous language learning groups.

Firstly, our task is to provide proper solutions to learning difficulties and then useful analyses to be carried out. It is well known that prepositions do have different meanings (Polysemous) and not often get stick to one meaning (Monosemous). Polysemy is "a semantic feature of words with multiple meanings" [1]

This effect of prepositions stresses and intimidates students who study English as a second or foreign language. The meaning of prepositions mainly depends on the sentence context.

Secondly most of prepositions are monosyllabic like Lam pointed and are unknown to

Students as they are pronounced quickly and with less clarity than content words.

The most complicating usage matters of prepositions and their contextual meaning is quite different from one language to another language and might intimidate learners.

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[1] Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language,* Longman, 1985, f. 659.

Learners cannot hang on their prepositional knowledge from their mother tongue because when we take an instance like transferring the Albanian preposition **'në'** into English becomes difficult due to "expressed in English by the prepositions **in, on** and **at"**. Any type of "presumption of semantic equivalence between the first and second languages" would only land them in prepositional errors. It is obvious that English has larger number of prepositions more than most of the languages have (Koffi 297). The Albanian language prepositions are highly polysemic. A tendency can be scrutinized accidentally and it is not easy to systematize English prepositions (Catalan 171).

Errors Made by EFL Learners

The Errors Made by EFL Learners, the errors that learners of EFL(English as Foreign Language) are expected to make are because of many diverse causes. Among all of these there are two main ones: The one is caused by intrusion from the mother tongue and the other is caused by intrusion from other structures. The English prepositions remain a tremendous problem for any EFL learner because he/she often relates them to his or her own mother tongue prepositional system. The obstruction is also caused by the change in number, understanding/meaning and usage of the prepositions in the source language (Albanian) and the target language (English) as a foreign language. All parts of speech play an immense role in the deprivation, insertion and selection of an improper preposition in English, which impair the sense of the idea intended by the student. In insertion to this, idiomatic usage of prepositions makes them difficult to study by native speakers

of the language[2]. Normally a preposition expresses a relationship between two entities: it shows a relation in space (between one thing and another), and /or an intercourse in time (between events), and more abstract relationship (government). So, the first characteristic is that both Albanian and English prepositions cannot stand by themselves: they get their meanings through contexts. So, the main problem is firstly in the fact that not every Albanian preposition has a definite equivalent in the target language, respectively in English and vice versa, and, secondly, not every English or Albanian preposition has a definite usage and meaning, indicating only space or time or following/ preceding a certain word.

Can prepositions be placed anywhere?

Almost all prepositions can be placed at the beginning at a sentence. A preposition can occupy a position before and after any other preposition, not rarely (highly) enforcing idiomatic expression, e.g. "she thinks she is for it at the moment," "we are not up to such an inconvenient job," "She is not sure she is up for a long trip." Normally it can occupy a place before or after any adverb, verb, any noun (or gerund) and adjective. It is worth writing, it is not completely at liberty to go where it likes: it absolutely can be placed only before articles: a, an, the as well as possessive pronouns /his, her/her, it/its). It is impossible to be posed either before or after subject pronouns (I, he/she[3].

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[2] Peter Watcyn-Jones Jake Allsope, *Test Your Prepositions,* Penguin Books 2000, f.778.

[3] S. Lindstromberg, *English Prepositions Explained*, Philadelphia, 1998, f. 165.

Traditional Approach:

Traditional way of teaching prepositions is through grammatical structures and several contexts. This approach cannot guarantee that the learners will successfully recall them whenever necessary to use them in an efficient way because they feel that the list is very unpredictable and memorizing a long list of contextually relevant prepositions will be practically beyond learner's' realization. Lam expands on this "trying to bear in mind a list of individual, unrelated uses is hardly conducive to increasing learners' understanding of how the prepositions are actually used and why the same preposition can express a wide range of meanings".[4] Here it becomes imminent that language instructors should strive to follow more innovative methods that have lesser cognitive demands.

Collocation Approach:

Rather than teaching individual units of prepositions it is better to teach them in "chunks" or along with pairs of frequently occurring words like *to depend on, to wait on, to step on, to work on and to rely on* etc., Among language teaching and learning circles the word collocation which means co-occurrence, is referred to by many words like "(WCO) word co-occurrence, chunks and formulaic sequence." In the case of prepositions these are usually phrasal verbs. Along with phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases such as *on time, on schedule, on…screen or on …leg* are taught as easily manageable chunks[5]. This method is beneficial for it appeals to the sensitiveness and easy grasping

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Geoffrey Leech, Students Grammar of Spoken and Written English, Pearson Education, Harlow, Essex, 2002,pp. 121.

to frequent language structures of the learners naturally[6]. Frequency-based learning is dependent upon the idea that human beings process language as if a group of words are single sensible units. According to Mueller "such associative learning is necessary to account for the acquisition of irregular forms and rigidly fixed idioms"[7]. Many language experts and researchers believe that acquiring language in chunks and using repeatedly in meaningful contexts suffers the learners to build confidence and allows deeper analyses later on. Teaching prepositions through collocation approach enables the use of corpora and concordance. Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) noted that DDL (Data Driven Language) technique which "emphasizes the collocational properties of language through concordancing lines" has an advantage over conventional methods[8]. Concordancing is an analysis of the structures and lexical patterns in digital databases[9].This advantage is manifestly visible in an experiment conducted by them on two different groups; one with DDL technique and the other with traditional method with usual textbooks as a resource.(Brown Corpus Online and searched Web Concordancer were used by Koosha and Jafarpourfor their study[10]. So, Collocational Approach with authentic data through Concordancing will have double benefits than conventional methods.

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Peter Watcyn-Jones Jake Allsope, *Test Your Prepositions,* Penguin Books 2000, f.778.

[10] Seth Lindstromberg, English Prepositions Explained, John Benjamin's Longman, 1987, pp. 321.

The Prototype Approach:

Deeper learning of prepositions, for both Lindstromberg and Lam , is possible through explanatory and meaning-based methods which in turn reinforce confidence and increased rate of retention. Lakoff's prototype theory is the basis for both of these linguists claim[11]. And this theory claims that among multiple meanings of the prepositions only one meaning is dominant among others. This dominance or standing out is being prototypical. In the case prepositions spatial and physical meanings are prototypical. For example the preposition *"on"* has several meanings but prototypical is "contact of an object with a line of surface"[12]. By studying and understanding prototypical meaning and analyzing them would allow learners to understand that the polysemous meanings of prepositions are metaphorical extensions. Again taking the example *"on"*, Lindstromberg explains that the non-prototypical meaning of the phrase *"come on"* can be understood through metaphorical extension of the prototypical meaning of *"on"*. So prototypical meanings can be taught through TPR (Total Physical Response) and the teacher can encourage to extending such understanding to abstract meanings. Compare and Contrast of prepositions technique is very useful to further widen the semantic mapping of the learners. Lindstromberg explained the meaning of *"come on"* by contrasting it with *"come back"*[13]. Semantic-based approaches often link various meanings of prepositions into a mental picture along with providing reliable and logical relation among several individual prepositions which otherwise appear unrelated. The difficulty of learning prepositions is not

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[11] Seth Lindstromberg, English Prepositions Explained, John Benjamin's Longman, 1987, pp. 321.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

only true of English but also extends to other languages as observed by Lam[14]. Lam conducted a study with two learner groups to find out which method was better between cognitive linguistic approach or learning individual prepositional usage. Since cognitive linguistic approach launches with Protypical meaning and extends to metaphorical or allied meanings, it has proved to be much useful, more effective, longer retention and with dramatically less efforts than traditional assimilation the hard way. Cognitive linguistic approach "allows teachers to point out the relationships between different uses of a preposition and describe patterns of meaning extension, as opposed to telling learners to simply memorize each use as an individual item[15]. In this way, learners will hopefully be more aware of the expressive range of a preposition". The results were even noted by her (Lam) that the group which is taught via cognitive linguistic approach fared well in post training test and delayed post training test[16]. This clearly shows that semantic-based teaching expedites the result of instant grasping and prolonged retention for timely recall.

Findings

Error Analysis: Learning Prepositions among Economics students of the private College AAB, and the Faculty of Education, Public University in Prishtina. Participants were the first grade students
Avni Islami PhD (Candidate).
The AAB University

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[14] Seth Lindstromberg, English Prepositions Explained, John Benjamin's Longman, 1987, pp. 321.

[15] Starvik, Jan. A Comprehensive Grammar of English Language, Longman, 1985, pp. 231.

[16] Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language,* Longman, 1985, f. 442

The sample of the study was comprised of 364 (182 of each institution) randomly selected students from the Private College AAB in Kosovo, and the Public University, respectively the Faculty of Education. The instrument used in the study was the essays written by the 1st class students of Economics and Education faculty in their first semester examination. The annual first semester examination papers in the subject of English proves that students find more difficulties in using correctly the English language prepositions than any other parts of speech. The errors committed by the students in the use of preposition were identified and counted in frequencies while writing essays on different topics.

RESULTS Table 1 of the private university AAB

Total number and percentage of errors among the Economics students on the measure of prepositions

One element	No. of errors	percentage
Prepositions	83	39.83%
Total	83	39.83%

Table 1 show that the total no. of errors made by economics students was 104, respectively 39.83 %. This shows that Economics students faced difficulties in learning prepositions.

RESULTS Table 2 of the Public University, the Faculty of Education

Total number and percentage of errors among the Education faculty students on the measure of prepositions

One element	No. of errors	percentage
Prepositions	138	77.94%
Total	138	77.94%

Table 2 show that the total no. of errors made by economics students was 182, respectively 77.94%. This shows that the Education faculty students faced big difficulties in learning prepositions.

RESULTS Table 3 of the private university AAB

Total number and percentage of errors among the Economics students on the measure of types prepositions

Types of prepositions	No. of errors	percentage
Prepositions of place	111	56.21
Prepositions of time	48	21.39
Prepositions of direction	51	28.39
Total	210	182

Table 3 shows that the total no. of errors made by economics students on the measure of types of prepositions 210, out of which (111) 56.21 % was observed in preposition of place, (48), 21.39% was observed in preposition of time and (51) 28.39 % was observed in preposition of direction. This shows that the Economics students faced more difficulties in learning prepositions of place.

RESULTS Table 4 of the Public University, Faculty of Education

Total number and percentage of errors among Education Faculty students on the measure of types prepositions

Types of prepositions	No. of errors	percentage
Prepositions of place	92	47.39

Prepositions of time	149	78.32
Prepositions of direction	62	33.36
Total	303	182%

Table 4 shows that the total no. of errors made by the economics students on the measure of types of prepositions 303, out of which (92) 47.39 % was observed in preposition of place, (149), 78.32% was observed in preposition of time and (62) 33.36 % was observed in preposition of direction. This shows that the students of the Faculty of Education faced more difficulties in learning prepositions of time.

Summary

Limiting any particular strategy may psychologically be over demanding to some trainers and researchers. But following Collocation Approach and Prototype Approach will certainly provide more exposure increasing the scope of assimilation. Manageably, larger quantities of inputs give a chance to the learners to relate their experiences to real time learning and how the prepositions are used in actual practice. In the same manner, Koffi (2010) reiterates the usefulness of sub categorization of frames of verbs and adjectives (323). Sub categorization helps learners to choose the correct preposition for verbs or adjectives depending on the context. An understanding of inter-relations among different parts of speech will further enhance root level understanding and accurate application is possible. Hence, teachers should encourage resources that are sound and have proven success to overcome the limitations of traditional methods in a learning atmosphere.

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