

**REMARKS ON TEACHING PREPOSITIONS IN ESP COURSES /  
REMARQUES SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DES PREPOSITIONS  
DANS LES COURS D'ANGLAIS LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE<sup>1</sup>  
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**Abstract:** *The article aims at emphasising the importance of prepositions in language learning and teaching. Identifying the relationship the preposition can establish with other parts and units of speech represent a difficulty for non-native learners of English. During ESP courses, the teacher should focus on examining prepositions in context and explaining the use of prepositions to learners to help them avoid errors in speaking or writing. Due to poor knowledge of the English language or to the mother tongue's influence during the language acquisition process, non-native learners of English might be unaware of the mistakes they make as regards the use of prepositions.*

**Key words:** *teaching prepositions, non-native learners of English, misuse of prepositions*

**Résumé:** *L'étude vise à mettre en évidence l'importance des prépositions dans l'apprentissage et l'enseignement de la langue. Identifier la relation que la préposition peut établir avec d'autres parties ou unités du discours représente une difficulté pour les apprenants non-natifs de l'anglais: Pendant les cours de langue anglaise dispensés aux étudiants non-spécialistes de la langue l'enseignant doit se concentrer sur l'examen des prépositions données en contexte et sur l'explication de leur emploi pour aider les apprenants à éviter les erreurs quand ils parlent ou écrivent. À cause d'une connaissance précaire de la langue anglaise ou de l'influence de leur langue maternelle pendant le processus d'acquisition, les apprenants non-natifs de l'anglais pourraient être ignorants quant aux erreurs qu'ils font en utilisant les prépositions.*

**Mots-clés:** *enseigner les prépositions, apprenants non-natifs de l'anglais, usage impropre des prépositions*

## 1. Introduction

The preposition can be considered as an important part of speech of the English grammar due to its ability to connect words and ideas. Prepositions can show the relationship between notional units of speech such as words, phrases, clauses that have full lexical meanings in word combinations or in sentences. This relationship established by the preposition in a context can be difficult to identify by learners of English.

Moreover, non-native learners of English may find hard to understand the prepositions and use them in order to communicate successfully. Additionally, one can say that it is difficult to learn to use prepositions correctly in a foreign language, especially such a generous number of prepositions as English has. One important idea related to this can be that, whenever non-native learners of English need to utilise prepositions, they may find hard to identify the correct preposition for a context due to its polysemous meaning or its uses e.g. dictionaries may list fifteen main uses of the preposition *at*. For example, according to Lindstromberg (2010: 173-182) *at* can have the following meanings:

- i) spatial such as "zooming out", "intersection", "point on a route", "points on a scale", "contact with edges, ends", "location in broad views", "with hotels, restaurants".
- ii) non-spatial meanings such as "typical activity-related connected", "focal point", "expressing a target".
- iii) temporal meanings such as "points on a scale", "points along the continuum of time", "clock times", "traditional points in a day", "coincidence with the beginning or the end of a period".

Furthermore, the preposition *at* occurs in fixed, idiomatic expressions and in non-fixed phrasal expressions (*idem*).

Prepositions, although appear as entries in dictionaries and are explained in grammar books, should be given more attention by the non-native learners and teachers of English. On the one hand, prepositions may seem to have the same meaning in some contexts. However, the meaning is rarely identical in the same context. According to

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Clementina NIȚĂ, University of Pitești, Romania, clementina.nita@upit.ro

Lindstromberg (*ibidem*: 32), the preposition *in* focuses on the result (enclosure) and off the movement that led up to enclosure (e.g. They got *in* the car). In contrast, the preposition *into* highlights movement (e.g. They got *into* the car). Therefore, *into* is more dynamic.

On the other hand, the usage of prepositions may seem a hindrance due to their multiple meanings. For example, in the example "Congratulations *on* your promotion!", the preposition *on* has a different meaning than the same preposition in the examples "The book is *on* the chair" or "*On* translation".

Another idea that should be highlighted regards the learners' need to be offered complete explanations and examples of correct use of prepositions during ESP teaching classes. Nonetheless, grammar is not taught in ESP classes as a separate topic being integrated in the communicative structures. That is why, whenever learners have grammatical difficulties that interfere with their productive and receptive skills, it is necessary for the teacher to pay attention to those difficulties and explain the correct usage in context (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:74).

## 2. Aim and impact of the topic

The aim of the article is to raise awareness about the difficulties encountered by non-native learners of English as regards the use of prepositions. Moreover, it focuses on the most frequent situations encountered in practice. Additionally, the examined meanings and usages are those that are widely shared rather than uncommon. As regards examples, they will be examined in point of accuracy in use. Moreover, such examples have been identified during teaching ESP courses to non-native learners of English.

This article is not an exhaustive and comprehensive treatment of the area, which is rather broad and complex. Moreover, the understandings and usages presented are those of native-speakers of more or less standard British or North American English. Therefore, the article will concentrate on examining the usage of prepositions, offering supporting examples discovered during teaching practice in ESP courses.

## 4. Theoretical view on teaching prepositions

Non-native learners of English may have different experiences as regards the use of prepositions. Moreover, the difference can appear due to personal features such as age, ethnicity, home area, or due to education, interests, class, and level of language command. Prepositions are useful to convey meaning on the physical, temporal, and abstract space.

According to Bruckfield (2011:10) space and spatial relations represent "the key to non-native speaker's reasoning of prepositions". Moreover, basic prepositions may have logical attributes, which can be perceived only by native speakers in the same way terms expressing emotions are resistant to translation unless cultural and historical relations are known (*idem*).

Additionally, prepositions are divided into prepositions of time, place, and movement. Nonetheless, each of these primary classes may have several subclasses such as specific time or place, position, direction, orientation, etc. For example, the preposition *in* can express both time and place e.g. *in* time, *in* Sweden. Teaching all the possible meanings for all classes of prepositions at a time or in a short period might be an unsuccessful approach. One method could be to teach spatial and temporal meanings of a preposition at different times. This can be more helpful for learners since they can consolidate information before moving forwards. Furthermore, identifying the main errors that might occur in using prepositions and examining them in class can be a handy solution for ESP teachers.

On the one hand, teaching prepositions should be tailored on learners' specific needs and according to the characteristics of their native language. Moreover, one method of teaching prepositions can be through explicit grammar instruction. According to Lam (2009), prepositions can be learned individually, within context. Nevertheless, learners cannot be confident enough on their knowledge of correct usage. This means that they need teacher's help to identify the correct preposition in a particular context.

(1) There is a mole *between* us. (incorrect)

(2) There is a mole *among* us. (correct)

Therefore, individual learning of prepositions may not be successful for all learners.

Another method can be that of practising the most frequent usages and meanings of a preposition, especially those that can be physically demonstrated. According to Lindstromberg (*op. cit.*: 20), this method of teaching is based on the analysis of the prototypical meaning (primary, basic meaning), all secondary meanings (extended) being related to the prototype. This means that this method emphasises the multiple meanings of a preposition in various language contexts.

- (3) Your dinner is *on* the table. (prototypical meaning; supportive contact of the subject with the surface)
- (4) She lives *on* Wharf Lane. (secondary meaning; non-supportive contact with the surface)

On the other hand, memorising prepositions in contexts or making examples with them may not ensure confidence to the learners since they will be unable to decide by themselves which preposition is correct and why, in a particular context. Therefore, it may be useful to examine prepositions with the learners the moment they appear in communication and to require them to build similar examples or to repeat the same structure in similar communicative contexts.

### 5. Common errors in practice

As regards errors, their source can be related to poor knowledge of English, to peculiarities of the English language, or to the influence of the learners' mother tongue. The native language interference in the use of prepositions by ESP learners of English is inevitable. According to Lott (1983) such errors are known as negative transfer errors and occur due to the structure of the mother tongue. For example, in the case of the preposition *on* in 'depend *on*', Romanian learners are quite likely to make the mistake of saying in English that one action 'depends *to* someone or *to* another action'. Moreover, the preposition *on* is taught to be utilised in order to show location e.g. *on* the table / floor /. Such examples are easy to learn due to their perfect equivalence in Romanian that is they can express place or position. Therefore, non-native learners need to be explained why a preposition like *on* is conventional in particular language situations, such as fixed expressions, collocations, or phrasal verbs. Teachers should highlight differences and offer useful rules to learners to help them avoid or overcome errors.

To exemplify the most frequent situations in which errors were identified during teaching practice in ESP classes, prepositions will be presented according to the place they occupy in the phrase or sentence as classified by Swan (2016: 209):

#### 5.1 Prepositions at the end of clauses

i) connecting various parts of speech that is a noun, adjective, or verb that precedes the preposition and a prepositional object (a noun phrase or pronoun) that follows the preposition)

- (5) That car was a present *for* her.
- (6) They're staring *at* the guest.

Most learners chose the preposition *to* instead of the prepositions *for* and *at*. As regards the preposition *for*, it can express intention. The choice of *to* may be explained by the presence of *to* in examples such as "She did it *to* him". According to Lindstromberg (*op. cit.*: 227), in this situation, the preposition has the meaning of an intention to do something harmful.

ii) *wh*-questions

- (7) Who's this coffee *for*?
- (8) Which flight have you travelled *on*?

In the examples above, two problems to solve were encountered in practice. Firstly, the correct preposition in the context and secondly, the place of the prepositions. Learners would rather choose the preposition *to* in the first example and the preposition *with* in the second. As regards the place of the preposition in each example, learners would choose the beginning of the question:

(9) *To* who's this coffee? (the preposition is incorrect and its position in the sentence is incorrect)

(10) *With* which flight have you travelled? (incorrect preposition and its position in the sentence is incorrect)

iii) Passive structures utilised in examples such as "The manager wants to be invited *to* the opening" and relative clauses identified in examples such as "That is what the employees are afraid *of*" were not encountered frequently in practice with learners of English. Nonetheless, sometimes, learners were unable to identify the correct preposition e.g. they utilised *at* instead of *to* and the leave out the preposition after *afraid*.

### 5.2 Prepositions before *-ing* forms and infinitives

In English, prepositions are not normally utilised before infinitives. After verb / noun / adjective + preposition the *-ing* form of the following verb is utilised.

(11) He insisted *on* meeting the CEO.

(12) She is very good *at* making business.

With *to be interested* the *-ing* form of the verb and infinitives are possible. However, there is a difference of meaning between these two uses.

(13) He was interested *in* learning more about the new products. (it expresses a wish to do something)

(14) She was interested *to* learn that the founder of the company lives at the North Pole. (it expresses reactions to things one learns)

### 5.3 Prepositions in collocations (preposition + noun combinations)

Prepositions are involved in numerous collocations, including many that are strong or fixed (Lindstromberg, *op. cit.*: 5) e.g. *in* trouble, *by* chance, *at* random. In collocations which are (more or less) fixed, prepositions may occur at the beginning (*in* trouble), at the end (depend *on*), or in the middle (one *by* one). Moreover, the phrases *by chance* and *at random* are similar in meaning inducing unintentional cross-association ('cross-swapping') of words (*idem*).

Common examples of prepositions in collocations are the following: *at* the cinema, *at* a party, *at* university, *at* the end (*at* the end where something stops); *by* Einstein, *by* car / bike / bus / train / boat / plane / air / sea / land; *on* foot, *on* the radio, *on* TV, *on* the phone, *on* page 10, *on* time; *for* ...reason; *from* ... point of view; *in*...opinion, *in* the end (finally, after a long time), *in* pen / pencil / ink, *in* a picture / photo; *in* the rain / snow; *in* a suit / raincoat / shirt / hat, *in* a ... voice

(15) Did you come *by* train or *by* bus?

(16) They discussed about the future meeting *on* the phone.

(17) The gentleman *in* the brown suit is the guest.

In the first example, learners of English would utilise the preposition *with* instead of *by*. Such a mistake stems from differences between English and learners' mother tongue, Romanian.

### 5.4 Prepositions after particular words and expressions (noun / adjective / verb + preposition)

Common examples may include the following: arrive *at / in*, congratulate *on*, difficulty *with*, divide *into*, enter *into* an agreement, explain *to*, polite *to*, smile *at*, think *of / about* e.g. "When guests arrived, you must be polite *to* them". Learners of English would rather utilise the preposition *with* instead of *to* due to the influence of their mother tongue. Moreover, the preposition *at* is important because almost all other prepositions revolve around it (Moore, 2018). In the expression *arrive at / in*, the preposition *at* can express the exact point or the location e.g. *at* Victoria Station whilst the preposition *in* can show the space e.g. *in* London.

### 5.5. No prepositions or omitted prepositions

According to Swan (*op. cit.*: 209), before a number of common expressions of time beginning *next, last, this, one, every, each, some* prepositions are not used e.g. "The meeting is *next* Tuesday". Moreover, no preposition is necessary to connect the verb *be* + measurement expressions to the subject of the clause e.g. "He's the same *weight* as I was two years ago." Additionally, prepositions are left out in the structure noun + infinitive + preposition e.g. "She has no place to live (*in*)". Furthermore, in informal language prepositions are normally omitted before the names of the days of the week, before *what time*, before *about* + time expression, in expressions such as (*in*) *this way*, (*in*) *the same way*, etc., before *home* and *some place, places*.

- (18) *What time* did she arrive? She arrived *about* 3 pm.  
(19) They went *home* late.  
(20) Let's go (*to*) *some place* where there's music and fun.

Learners would rather utilise the preposition *at* before *what time, about* and the preposition *to* before *home* and *some place*.

### 6. Conclusion

Therefore, it can be stated that non-native learners and teachers of English should pay more attention to the use of prepositions in ESP courses. Firstly, prepositions are numerous and may have multiple meanings in similar contexts. Secondly, prepositions have to be utilised to connect different parts or units of speech or may be omitted. Thirdly, the meanings and uses of prepositions cannot be memorised by learners and therefore, teachers should tailor methods and procedures on learners' needs and level of language competence. Finally, there are reasons that explain the misuse of prepositions by non-native learners of English such as the structure of the English language, a poor command of English, or the interference of mother tongue.

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Elena Clementina NIȚĂ is a lecturer at the Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Theology, Letters, History and Arts, University of Pitești. Her area of interest includes applied linguistics, translation studies, ESP, and didactics.