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DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING PREPOSITIONS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

KRISTEN LORINCZ AND REBEKAH GORDON

1.0 Introduction

Prepositions are notoriously difficult for English Language Learners to master due to the sheer number of them in the English language and their polysemous nature. Numerous analyses of the linguistic output of ELLs have revealed that prepositional errors of substitution, omission, and addition account for the majority of syntactic errors. Since prepositions present such an immense challenge for language learners, it is vital that teachers develop effective instructional methods. In this paper, we will analyze the traditional method of teaching prepositions, and evaluate alternative methods.

In order to determine what pedagogical methods are most effective, it is important to first understand what makes learning prepositions so difficult; this challenge can be attributed to several factors. First, prepositions are generally polysemous. Polysemy is "a semantic characteristic of words that have multiple meanings" (Koffi, 2010, p. 299). Essentially, the majority of prepositions in English have a variety of meanings depending on context. Thus, learners often become frustrated when trying to determine prepositional meanings and when trying to use them appropriately (Koffi, 2010, p. 299). Second, as Lam (2009) points out, prepositions can be difficult to recognize, particularly in oral speech, because they typically contain very few syllables. Many English prepositions are monosyllabic, such as *on, for,* or *to.* As a result, language learners may not be able to recognize prepositions in rapid, naturally-occurring speech. Moreover, the use of prepositions in context varies greatly from one language to another, often causing negative syntactic transfer. The same prepositions can carry vastly different meanings in various languages. For instance, a native speaker of Spanish would have difficulties translating the preposition *por* into English, since it can be "expressed in English by the prepositions *for, through, by,* and *during*" (Lam, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, learners cannot depend on prepositional knowledge from their first language. If learners do make "assumptions of semantic equivalence between the first and second languages", it often results in prepositional errors (Lam, 2009, p. 3). Lastly, the sheer number of prepositions in the English language also contributes to their difficulty. English has 60 to 70 prepositions; a higher number than most other languages (Koffi, 2010, p. 297). As a result, it is nearly impossible for language learners to systemize English prepositions (Catalan, 1996, p. 171).

2.0 Traditional Approach

The traditional method of teaching prepositions is through explicit grammar instruction. Students focus on learning prepositions individually within context, with no further expansion (Lam, 2009, p. 3). This approach assumes that there is no predictability in the use of prepositions, and that they must simply be learned context by context (Lam, 2009, p. 3). Lam's (2009) study revealed that students who were taught using this traditional method had little confidence in their ability to properly use prepositions, and had minimal retention rates. As Lam (2009) elaborates, "trying to remember 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" (p. 3). Thus, it is apparent that language instructors must explore more explanatory methods of teaching prepositions.

3.0 The Collocation Approach

One alternative to the traditional method of teaching prepositions is to use collocations. Rather than teaching prepositions individually, students can be taught using "chunks," or words that often occur together. Throughout various studies, the terms "chunk," "formulaic sequence," "word co-occurrence (WCO)," and "collocation" are used interchangeably. In the case of prepositions, many of these "chunks" are phrasal verbs. For example, instead of teaching *on* as a single entity, students can be taught the phrasal verbs *to rely on*, *to wait on*, *to walk on*, *to work on,* or *to pick on*. In addition to phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases can also be taught as formulaic sequences, such as *on time, on schedule, on…screen,* or *on…leg* (Mueller, 2011, p. 484).

This method is advantageous for several reasons. First, research has shown that learners of all ages are sensitive to the frequencies of linguistic input (Mueller, 2011, pp. 480-481). Frequency-based learning is built upon the idea that humans naturally process groups of words as a single unit. Children, for example, often express phrases as single words, such as *alotta* instead of *a lot of* or *gimme* instead of *give me.* Secondly, chunk-learning is thought to be a precursor step to linguistic pattern analysis. According to Mueller (2011), "such associative learning is necessary to account for the acquisition of irregular forms and rigidly fixed idioms" (p. 481). Researchers believe that such forms may be stored as chunks initially, but after repeated exposure, they are more closely analyzed by the learner.

Third, teaching prepositions through collocations easily allows for the use of corpora and concordancing lines. Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) conducted a study with adult Iranian EFL learners using data-driven learning (DDL). Data-driven learning is a technique that "emphasizes the collocational properties of language through concordancing lines" (p. 194). Furthermore, "concordancing" can be defined as "a method of analyzing language by studying structures and lexical patterns found in digital databases" (p. 195). The learners who used concordancing lines in language corpora were exposed to more authentic input and more opportunities to notice and become aware of grammatical patterns. This method forced the students to become pro-active participants in their learning of prepositions; according to Koosha and Jafarpour (2006), "DDL promotes creativity and self-discovery learning" (p. 196). In Koosha and Jafarpour's (2006) study, the experimental group of 100 learners who studied prepositions through DDL performed significantly higher than the 100 learners in the control group. The control group also studied prepositions through the use of collocations, but were explicitly taught patterns from conventional textbooks rather than implicitly discovering those patterns like the learners in the experimental group. Therefore, using collocations to teach prepositions is best coupled with the use of authentic data which can be found in language corpora. The aforementioned study used the Brown Corpus Online and searched using the Web Concordancer (p. 200).

Teaching prepositions through the use of collocations is not without its share of criticism. Lindstromberg (1996), for example, states that the collocationist view avoids "any unifying insight about relations among different uses of a particular word" and leads to an "uneconomical use of learners' time both in and out of the classroom" (p. 235). He suggests that teachers use a semantically-based approach which utilizes a prototype theory of linguistics. Similarly, Lam

(2009) advocates for a semantic approach using cognitive linguistics to create a "general schema" or "semantic map" when teaching prepositions (pp. 2-3).

4.0 The Prototype Approach

Both Lindstromberg (1996) and Lam (2009) argue that teaching prepositions in an explanatory, semantically-based manner allows for deeper learning, increased learner confidence, and longer rates of retention. Both of their studies are based on Lakoff's prototype theory. This theory claims that prepositions have multiple meanings, but one meaning is thought to be the most dominant, or prototypical. In the case of prepositions, the spatial, physical meaning is considered to be the prototype. For example, the preposition *on* has multiple meanings, but the prototypical definition is "contact of an object with a line of surface" (Lindstromberg, 1996, p. 229). The prototype theory contends that the polysemous nature of prepositions can be explained through analysis of the prototypical meaning; all non-prototypical meanings are thought to be related to the prototype, often through metaphorical extension (p. 228). Looking again at the preposition *on*, Lindstromberg (1996) explains that non-prototypical meanings like *come on* can be understood by extending the prototypical meaning. This means that teachers must first teach the prototypical meaning, often through the use of Total Physical Response (TPR), and only then begin to branch out to more abstract meanings. To extend the semantic mapping even further, comparison and contrast to other prepositions can be useful. Lindstromberg (1996), for example, explained the concept of *come on* by contrasting it with *come back* (p. 230). Not only do semantic-based approaches unify various meanings of each preposition, but they also provide connections between prepositions that are otherwise considered only individually.

Lam's (2009) study showed that learning prepositions is not only difficult for English language learners, but for Spanish language learners as well. Her study compared two experimental groups with one control group in learning the prepositions *por* and *para*. The experimental groups were taught using a cognitive linguistic approach based upon the prototype theory whereas the control group was taught individual uses of each preposition. Such a 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. In this way, learners will hopefully be more aware of the expressive range of a preposition" (Lam, 2009, p. 4). All three groups were given a pre-test, an immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test. The results revealed that the learners in the experimental groups were more accurate in their use of *por* and *para* than the control group in both post-tests. This suggests that teaching prepositions using a semantically-based approach has a positive effect on both immediate knowledge and the retention of that knowledge. Finally, Lam's (2009) study showed that learners in the experimental groups were more confident in their answers, suggesting that they had a deeper understanding of the prepositions and how they are used (p. 11).

5.0 Summary

While researchers may not agree on a particular strategy for teaching prepositions, it is clear that the traditional manner of teaching them individually is not sufficient. Both the

collocationist approach and the prototypical approach require that learners be exposed to a plethora of input. Large quantities of input allow learners to discover patterns in the ways prepositions are used. Both approaches also consider other words besides the prepositions themselves; the collocationist approach focuses on words that frequently occur before or after the preposition whereas the prototypical approach focuses on words that semantically relate to the preposition. Similarly, Koffi (2010) emphasizes the power of teaching students the subcategorization frames of verbs and adjectives (p. 323). The knowledge of subcategorization frames will help learners select the appropriate preposition for a given verb or adjective. Having these interrelated networks of the various parts of speech allows more efficient retrieval and a deeper understanding of prepositions. Teachers must take advantage of resources that provide learners with authentic input as well as take the time to explore the various meanings of prepositions and how they relate to one another.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristen Lorincz is a graduate student in the Teaching English as a Second Language Program at St. Cloud State. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. Currently, she is a graduate assistant in the College ESL Program at SCSU, where she has taught reading and writing courses. Her decision to join the program stemmed from her interest in the interface of culture and language. Upon completion of her Master of Arts program, Kristen hopes to either teach abroad in Eastern Europe or pursue further schooling in applied linguistics.

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