# *TEACHING PREPOSITIONS*

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*Predarea prepoziţiilor (Rezumat)*

*Lucrarea are ca obiect metodele şi tehnicile folosite în predarea prepoziţiilor, având în vedere faptul că prepoziţia este una dintre sursele cele mai predispuse la erori de scriere, vorbire şi înţelegere a limbii engleze. Structura prezentării este următoarea: probleme şi erori curente în utilizarea prepoziţiilor ce se referă la construcţii în care prepoziţia este necesară sau nu, precum şi alegerea prepoziţiei atunci când este necesară; surse importante de erori în utilizarea prepoziţiilor reprezentate de sinonimie, polisemie, omonimie; metode şi tehnici în predarea prepoziţiilor având în vedere problema omisiunii şi a selecţiei; concluzii care subliniază faptul că, în ciuda tuturor tipurilor de metode şi tehnici folosite în predare, cel mai important „ingredient" al acestui proces este practica propriu-zisă.*

Prepositions represent a very "challenging" chapter of English grammar.If prepositions are sometimes difficult even for the native speaker, they are by far one of the richest sources of errors for the foreign student in understanding, speaking and writing English. Learners of English may be faced with a variety of problems in selecting and using prepositions, especially if one takes into account the fact that the idiomatic use of English prepositions is not based on logical criteria, being a matter of usage.

## I Current problems and errors in using prepositions

The two main problems the learner of English usually encounters refer to:
constructions in which a preposition is required or not
the choice of the right preposition when one is required

Errors appear when the student does not expect a preposition in a certain construction because there is no preposition in his/her own language, or vice versa, ie the student uses a preposition when it should not be used. But the most common error is the selection of the wrong preposition, caused by the interference with the mother tongue. Beginners are prone to use a preposition which they translate from their language and this is almost never the right one.

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Thus, an obligatory preposition is omitted in some cases.

eg Everybody waited him, but he didn't show up. (instead of "Everybody waited *for* him"= Toată lumea l-a aşteptat)

The error appears as there is no preposition in Romanian.

In some other cases a preposition is used when there is no need to use one.

eg They entered *in* the room jumping with joy. (instead of "They entered the room"). In Romanian there is a preposition. (Ei au intrat *în* cameră)

or: She escaped *from* death by inches. (instead of "She escaped death by inches"). The Romanian "a scăpa de la moarte" has as an equivalent "to escape death" in English. So, the prepositions "in" and "from" are not necessary.

Yet, the most common error remains the use of the wrong preposition – again under the influence of the mother tongue.

eg I congratulated him *for* his success. (instead of "I congratulated him *on* his success")

## II Main sources of errors in using prepositions

English is a language which uses a lot of prepositions and this may cause problems of choice. We have already mentioned that interference and analogy with the student's mother tongue are a primary source of error. Besides, there are many other sources of error:

rich synonymy: many English prepositions have nearly the same meaning (as there are no perfect synonyms)

Some verbs, such as the verb "belong", can be used fairly freely with a set of different prepositions without any great difference in meaning.

eg This belongs *to* me.
This book belongs *with* the dictionary on the shelf.
He belongs *among* the great people of his time.
A TV set belongs *in* every home.
These synonyms belong *under* a different heading.
He doesn't really feel he belongs here.

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polysemy: some prepositions (eg *at* ) perform different functions. For example, *at* expresses relationships in time (eg *at* ten o'clock), space (eg *at* the theatre) and other relationships as well.

homonymy: there are words functioning as preposition, adverb, conjunction, verb.

eg I saw him *before.* (adv.)
*Before* dinner, I'll be there. (prep.)
Call on me *before* you leave. (conj.)

idiomatic and metaphorical use of prepositions
eg shoulder *to* shoulder; arm *in* arm; day *after* day
The engine died *on* us.

phrasal verbs: when verbs combine with prepositions or/and adverbial particles, either this combination reinforces the meaning of the verb or the primary meaning of the verb is completely changed.
eg to make for = go toward; help to make possible, promote

## III Methods and techniques in teaching prepositions

Naturally, different kinds of prepositional problems require different approaches. A first step in teaching prepositions is to make students expect them. Then, the teacher has to help them use the correct preposition whenever one is needed.

The problem of omission can be solved by showing the students what to listen for – in this case, prepositions. Once the students learn to listen for and recognize the "link words" they are used to passing over, the only problem is to train them to properly select prepositions, depending on the context, the relations they indicate between various autonomous elements in the sentence, their idiomatic and metaphorical uses.
The "Listen and write", "Listen and do", "Listen and draw" set is an active, communicative process enabling students to recognize prepositions – in an

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early stage, then to infer their meaning(s) and, finally, to use them correctly. In fact, this is a variation of the same exercise.

The teacher may read or play a casette containing a short text (even a song) in which a certain number of prepositions occur. For beginners, in order to make this exercise easier, the teacher could hand in the written text in which only the prepositions are missing. The students just have to listen to the cassette and fill in the blanks with the missing prepositions on their activity sheets. For intermediate, advanced students, they only hear a text being read and put down the prepositions they hear. It is also a good idea to have the students write every preposition with its complement/nominal completive (specifying that "complement" represents the nominal sequence with which the preposition forms the prepositional group), since these can be more easily perceived as a unit as they occur together. The students could try to reconstruct the segments containing prepositions, then translate them in the context and finally write their own examples with the recently learnt items.

The "Listen and do" variation of this exercise implies the students' doing something active, such as raising a hand, clapping their hands, repeating the preposition aloud etc whenever they hear a preposition.

The "Listen and draw" method is effective with young students and it can be used successfully in teaching prepositions with less abstract reference. For example, the teacher may read short, simple sentences of the kind:

The ball is *on* the table.
The ring is *in* the box..

And the students can draw a ball on a table, a ring in a box etc.

This leads us to another methodological suggestion concerning the use of: Schematic pictures /icons/visuals

The previous mehod ("Listen and draw" in particular) requires active participation on the part of the student mainly. But the teacher can use visual helps, too. Yet, these aids cannot be considered a substitute for drills, they just make these drills more meaningful.

The meaning of a preposition, especially the prototypical one (i.e. the primary meaning), can be demonstrated with objects or icons. More complex

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matrices are of great use in advanced classes to illustrate not only position or direction (usually taught by means of schematic pictures in elementary classes), but also cause and effect, metaphorical uses of prepositions (e.g. “The engine died *on* us”; “His opinion rests *on* solid grounds”) .

A schematic picture by which a teacher can present prepositions of place and movement is the ***map***. The learners work in pairs. One does not have the map and wants to get from point A to point B. The other student consults the map and gives him details of the type: Walk *along* the valley until you see a forest. Then go *across* the forest.

The teacher can use ***flash cards*** with the preposition on one side and the visual symbol on the other side. After showing the symbol to the students, the teacher elicits the corresponding preposition and an appropriate sentence to illustrate it.

Other methods and techniques to teach prepositions are:

Guided/ guiding questions

Students can be trained to use prepositions and prepositional phrases as units to an information question.

e.g. Who are you waiting *for* ?
I am waiting *for* my classmate.

Cloze exercises

This type of exercise requires the selection of the correct preposition, it is a common completion-type exercise. This technique provides a sentence frame into which a blank space has been left.

There are several variations of this exercise. The students have to fill in the blank spaces with the appropriate prepositions. For a more controlled exercise, the prepositions are provided, but in aleatory order or one dash for each letter in the word is left.

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e.g. Fill in the blank spaces with the appropriate prepositions/ with the following prepositions: *at, from, in, off, on, through:*

l. He is different …his brother. 2. The beauty of this town consists…the style of the buildings. 3. The picture… the wall was splendid. 4. Be careful! You might fall…the ladder. 4. She took the ring…her finger. 5.The noise was heard…the wall. 6. I'll meet you…5p.m.

Matching exercises

Matching exercises are easily adapted for nouns, adjectives or verbs with obligatory preposition. The students have to match the nouns, adjectives or verbs in column A with the appropriate prepositions in column B.

e.g. Match the nouns in A with their prepositions in B (some can take two or three prepositions):

| A | B |
|---|---|
| conclusion | to |
| affection | for |
| sacrifice | against |
| disgust | from |
| secret | towards |
| permission | at |

Recognition exercises

It refers to recognizing/finding synonyms or antonyms of a preposition in context. For example, in the following sentence:" I felt sick *in* the stomach", *at* is a synonym of *in*.

Role play

Role play is very effective with intermediate-advanced students. They could be asked to role play different situations and use certain words with obligatory preposition. (e.g. Imagine you are in court; the prosecuting counsel, the defence counsel and the witness are the roles played by three students who

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have to use: to accuse of, to charge with, to be sure of, to look at, to agree on etc).

Parallel structures

This can be used to teach the more or less numerous relationships a preposition may express, taking into account that some of the common prepositions may express not only various senses of a broad meaning, but also quite different meanings. For example, the prepositions *in, on, at* can be presented as prepositions of time (to mark the descending order: year, month, hour) and as prepositions of place (to mark the same descending order: city, street, specific location).

There are a lot of other methods to teach prepositions: games, writing compositions with given prepositions, the "odd one out" exercise, mind maps (starting from a preposition for which the students have to find verbs, nouns, adjectives that preposition matches), the old, traditional translation exercise etc.

**Conclusions**

Teaching prepositions is a complex process. It depends on many factors including: the students' perceptual mechanism and extra-linguistic knowledge, their level of English and motivation, the purpose for which the students need the language etc all these leading the teacher to different manners of presentation.

One of the main goals in teaching English is to help students develop their communication ability and this is what the paper has tried to do by presenting a variety of methods and techniques in teaching prepositions communicatively, interactively.

The material used in class should be structured from easy to difficult, simply to complex, concrete to abstract. Pair and small groups work are interactive activities, increasing motivation, participation in class and self-confidence.

Despite all methods and techniques used to teach new items (in this case prepositions), there is no substitution for constant study and practice in context.

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Although the exercises presented here are subject to variation, their basic function remains the same: teaching English effectively.

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