

English prepositions and some implications for teaching and learning english

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Abstract: *Prepositions are fundamental components of English grammar, connecting words and conveying spatial, temporal, and abstract relationships. However, they often present significant challenges for learners due to their context-dependent meanings, idiomatic usage, and subtle nuances. This article explores the complexities of English prepositions, highlighting common difficulties and provides practical strategies for mastering prepositions, including contextual learning, targeted exercises, and teacher-guided instruction in order to help learners enhance their fluency and accuracy in using English prepositions.*

Keywords: *English prepositions, language learning, contextual learning, prepositional usage, ESL strategies*

Introduction

English prepositions are small but mighty elements of the language, serving as connectors that establish relationships between words, phrases, and ideas. Despite their simplicity in form, prepositions are notoriously challenging for English learners to master. Their meanings often depend on context, and their usage is riddled with exceptions, idiomatic expressions, and cultural influences.

1. What is preposition?

A preposition is a short word that is employed in sentences which are normally found positioned in the latter part of the sentence, but before a [noun](#) or [pronoun](#). There are a number of definitions of preposition in renowned dictionaries. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a preposition is a word linking a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun to another word, especially a verb, noun, or adjective. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary describes a preposition as a word or group of words, such as in, from, to, out of, and on behalf of, that is used before a noun or pronoun to indicate place, position, time, or method. According to it, a preposition is defined as "a function word that typically combines with a noun phrase to form a phrase which usually expresses a modification or predication."

2. Types of prepositions

2.1. Simple (single) prepositions:

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985) state that: "simple prepositions are the prepositions utilized to express the connection that a sentence's nouns and pronouns have with the remaining of the terms in it."

This is the most common type of preposition, which consists of one word to indicates direction, location, time or method. Single prepositions are frequently used in everyday language and are fundamental to sentence structure.

Examples of this are: on, in, under, off, over, at, to, by, above, near, with, for, but, behind....

2.2. Double Prepositions

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002) describe double prepositions as two simple prepositions merging to form the one that links the noun(s) or pronoun(s) to the remaining words in a phrase. Two prepositions are used as a fixed pair to create a particular meaning, they add a layer of complexity and detail to the relationship between the noun or pronoun and other parts of the sentence to indicate specific relationships such as direction, position, or time more precisely than single prepositions. Double prepositions help convey detailed spatial and temporal relationships, enhancing the clarity and precision of communication.

Some of the double prepositions are: in between, from within, out of.

2.3. Compound Prepositions

According to Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002): A compound preposition is a prepositional phrase that consists of two or more words combined to function as a single preposition. These words typically include a combination of prepositions with other parts of speech such as adverbs or conjunctions.

The words in a compound preposition are used together in a fixed and established phrase to provide a more specific relational meaning, clearer relational

context, often indicating time, place, manner, or cause than a single preposition. This type of preposition is considered to enhance the descriptive quality of language, allowing for more detailed and nuanced expressions of relationships between different elements in a sentence.

Some of the compound prepositions are: on behalf of, according to, in addition to....

2.4. Phrasal Prepositions

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999) define a phrasal preposition as a prepositional phrase that functions as a single preposition.

This type of preposition often contains two or more words which consists of a preposition combined with other words, such as adjectives or nouns, to convey a more detailed and specific relational meanings compared to simple prepositions, often indicating relationships such as place, time, manner, cause, or condition. Phrasal prepositions help clarify the relationship between different parts of a sentence, enhancing understanding and coherence. These features make phrasal prepositions essential for adding clarity and precision to language, allowing for more detailed expression of relationships between different elements in a sentence.

Followings are examples of common phrasal prepositions: in addition to, in front of, by means of ...

2.5. Participle Prepositions

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985) defines participles as those derived from participles (typically present participles ending in -ing) and function as prepositions within a sentence. They typically indicate a relationship involving time, cause, or manner.

Though participle prepositions are typically derived from present participles, which are verb forms ending in -ing or from past participles, which are verb forms ending in -ed, they function as prepositions to indicate relationships between different parts of a sentence.

Participle preposition often have a fixed prepositional use and are recognized as standard prepositions within the language, adding a nuanced meaning to the relationships they describe.

Participle prepositions are followed by noun phrases, pronouns, or gerunds that they govern to provide additional context, conditions, or circumstances under which an action occurs.

Examples of present participle are: considering,

touching, following, failing, accepting, saving, Examples of past participle are: respected, given, gone, taken, provided, pleased

2.6. Particle prepositions:

According to Bolinger, D. (1971), a particle preposition is a type of preposition that functions as part of a phrasal verb or a prepositional phrase, often appearing alongside a verb to create a specific meaning. Unlike traditional prepositions that stand alone, particle prepositions are typically combined with verbs to form a verb phrase with a distinct meaning.

This type of preposition are used in conjunction with verbs to form phrasal verbs or verb phrases (e.g., “look after,” “give up”). It is a fixed phrase with specific meaning that is often different from the meanings of the individual words when they are used separately. Particle preposition, therefore, are not used independently but are part of a larger verb phrase or expression. However, this type of preposition is commonly used in informal speech and writing, adding nuance and variation to language.

Examples of particle prepositions: look after, give up, in into, turn down, come across, put off....

2.7. Disguised Prepositions.

In their publication, Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999) state that a disguised preposition is a preposition that has been shortened or altered in form, often through a historical process, and appears as part of another word or phrase.

These prepositions are not immediately recognizable as prepositions because they do not stand alone but are integrated into the language in a way that disguises their original function. Disguised prepositions convey historical evolution as they have evolved from older forms of the language and are often integrated into other words or phrases to consistently show relationships between words in a sentence.

These prepositions are frequently disguised as other components of the English language. In statements, these prepositions are frequently disguised as “a” and “o.”

A hidden preposition that is not actually used or utilized in a phrase but is addressed indirectly is known to as an indirect preposition.

Examples commonly found are:

Aboard: This is a combination of “on” and “board,” functioning as a preposition meaning “on or in a ship, aircraft, or other vehicle.”

Across: Derived from “on cross,” used as a preposition to mean “from one side to the other.”

Ahead: Combines “on” and “head,” functioning to indicate a position in front or in advance.

O’: of the clock

A shore: on shore

A day: in a day

2.8. Detached Preposition

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985) define detached preposition as one separated from its complement (the noun or pronoun it governs) and placed at the end of a clause or sentence. Although separated, the meaning remains clear, as the context provides enough information to understand the relationship.

This type of prepositions is commonly used in questions where the preposition is separated from the interrogative pronoun, it is also usually found in relative clauses where the preposition is separated from the relative pronoun and often used in informal contexts not in formal writing.

examples of disguised prepositions are

Whom are you waiting *for*?

Are you staring *at me*?

What are you thinking *about*?

3. Some implications for English teachers

3.1. Contextual Learning

Prepositions should be taught with authentic materials such as articles, stories, and dialogues where they can then be highlighted and discussed. This helps improve retention as learners can associate them with real-life situations, improving memory and long-term retention. At the same time, contextual learning allows learners to grasp subtle differences in meaning, then apply prepositions correctly in functional communication, such as giving directions or describing locations.

3.2. Interactive Activities

Common activities are Bingo or role plays helps encouraging learners’ engagement, practical application, immediate feedback and enhancing their retention, developing communication skills, collaborating learning, contexture learning with a lot of motivation, confidence for a variety of learning methods.

3.3. Practice and Repetition

Activities like drills and exercises provide regular practice preposition exercises, both in writing and speaking. This helps improve learners’ retention.

3.4. Focused Lessons

Thematic Units such as travel or daily routine

where propositions naturally occur frequently give learners clear learning objectives with targeted practice, increased understanding, systematic progression, structured learning environments, error correcting opportunities and better application in contexts.

3.5. Technology

Online Games and Apps enhance learners’ engagement and motivation, give them instant feedback and opportunities for convenient and flexible personalized learning, interactive practice, progress tracking and most of all, learners can enjoy a fun and low-stress learning environment.

Conclusion

English prepositions are essential building blocks of effective communication, yet they pose significant challenges for learners due to their abstract meanings, idiomatic usage, and cultural nuances. To master them, learners should focus on contextual learning, integrating prepositions into practical language use rather than memorization alone.

By exploring prepositions in authentic materials such as conversations, texts, and media, learners can gradually develop an intuitive sense of their application. Combining these efforts with targeted practice, such as collocation exercises and visual aids, further solidifies understanding. Teachers can enhance this process by emphasizing patterns, providing meaningful examples, and fostering active engagement in prepositional usage.

Ultimately, patience and consistent exposure are key. With time, learners can develop confidence and accuracy in using prepositions, significantly improving their fluency and overall command of English.

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