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The Second Language Acquisition of English Prepositions

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Abstract

The acquisition of English prepositions is especially difficult for students learning English as a second language. This paper briefly discusses how prepositions are used in English and a few of the reasons prepositions cause problems for English language learners. It also analyzes the underlying system that governs prepositions and how this system might be represented to English language learners. Finally, it analyzes the current pedagogy and suggests a possible alternative to the status quo.

The Second Language Acquisition of English Prepositions

Introduction

Luis, a new student at the local college, is an English Language Learner (ELL). He needs to go grocery shopping, so he asks a fellow student how to get to the nearest grocery store. Notice all the prepositions in his friend's reply: "Go around the corner, and through the first two intersections. At the next stoplight, turn right. Continue for about a block, and you should see a gas station on the corner and a shopping center behind it. The grocery store is in that shopping center." Luis will have to be a smart thinker to find the grocery store. If he misinterprets *around* the corner as *past* the corner and *through* the first two intersections as *to* the first two intersections, he may end up turning right *at* the second intersection (the results are worse if he misunderstands the numeral *two* as the preposition *to*). Even if Luis makes it to the gas station, *behind* is an ambiguous term and may be construed as *next to* or *in front of*, depending on where Luis is standing when he looks at the gas station.

Directions like these are not the only situations in which ELLs have trouble with prepositions. Consider little Keiko in elementary school. She is new in class and needs to get the craft box for her table. Her classmates are very helpful, but again use many prepositions: "Go around table 5 and look in the red cabinet. Our box is on the third shelf, under all the paper." Perhaps she could find it if she just looked for the red cabinet, but if there are three such cabinets in the room, she will have trouble. In addition, Keiko might be confused and scared enough that she simply will not move until she understands.

The English preposition is often defined as a word that describes the location of one object in relation to another. However, prepositions are often vague and confusing,

even for native speakers. It is extremely hard for ELLs to learn the nuances of all the English prepositions, how to understand them, and how to use them.

Despite these challenges, prepositions are hardly addressed in the current teaching strategy. Part of the reason is that just as prepositions are hard to understand, they are also hard to teach. One cannot really explain a preposition without using one or two more prepositions in the definition. Next, the teacher would have to define those new prepositions. Soon, both the teacher and the student are caught in a spiraling whirlwind of prepositions and their still-vague meanings. If a teacher can explain a preposition without using an alternative preposition, the definition and meaning are often vague and do not result in a clear understanding for the student.

Since it easier not to teach prepositions, many textbooks (and therefore many teachers) do not do so. This lack of teaching results in almost a "sink-or-swim" situation for the ELL. If his teacher is not teaching him about prepositions, Luis may have to navigate many situations like this one before he masters these prepositions.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a new tool for teaching prepositions to the ELL. Such a tool would aid in the teaching of prepositions and therefore encourage teachers to do so. First, the theoretical background of prepositions will be discussed. This section will review Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar, the theoretical framework of prepositions themselves, and how second language acquisition works in relation to prepositions. Next, the specific problems of prepositions will be discussed; namely, the mismatch of prepositions in different languages and the inconsistency of prepositions in English. In response to these problems, a new theory, called Cognitive Linguistics, will be introduced and explained. Finally, a new teaching strategy based on

Cognitive Linguistics will be presented. It is hoped that this teaching strategy can be used and applied to a regular classroom, thus improving how English prepositions are taught to ELLs.

Theoretical Background

Universal Grammar (UG) is most closely associated with the linguist Noam Chomsky (1981). The basic premise of UG is that all languages share a basic deep grammar, and the ability to access this grammar is innate. That is, humans can access this grammar from birth, without an elder teaching them directly how to access UG consciously. We will explore two aspects of UG in this paper: first, the theoretical framework of prepositions according to UG; and second, the way in which UG interacts with Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams do a good job of explaining UG to the introductory student. To begin, UG divides any language into five different categories. These categories are phonetics (the study of individual speech sounds), phonology (the knowledge of how sounds fit together to make words), morphology (the study of the structure of words), syntax (the study of how words fit together to form phrases), and semantics (the study of the meaning of individual words and how they relate to each other) (2007).

Within syntax, there are two basic categories of words: content words and function words. Content words are those that have meaning or semantic value. They include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Function words, on the other hand, are those that exist to explain or create grammatical or structural relationships into which the content words may fit. They have little meaning of their own and are much fewer in

number than content words. Function words include pronouns, articles, and conjunctions. Most linguists will classify prepositions as function words (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007).

However, categorizing prepositions as function words is somewhat controversial. Much of the controversy is based on research concerning agrammatic aphasia. According to *A Dictionary of Psychology*, Aphasia is usually the result of disease or injury, such as a stroke, that affects an area of the brain that controls language. The most well-known areas are Broca's and Wernicke's. Agrammatic aphasia particularly affects the person's ability to use function words or even organize words in their correct order ("Aphasia," 2009). Karen Froud hypothesizes that since prepositions supposedly fall into the category of function words, their use should be affected by agrammatic aphasia. However, when Froud conducted tests, this hypothesis was disconfirmed. Therefore she outlined four characteristics of functional categories. She then showed that prepositions defied all four of these characteristics. Yet prepositions cannot be considered content words. Her conclusion is that the distinction between function and content words should be re-assessed (2001). Yosef Grodzinsky (1988) came to a similar conclusion in his research on agrammatic aphasia.

While this debate does not have a deep impact on this paper, it does highlight that prepositions are a tricky subject, even for linguists. While we may continue to consider prepositions as functional, we must recognize that they do encode a relationship between two objects. Edward Finegan in his book and Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman in their book, explain that prepositions describe a semantic relationship between

two “entities,” one being a trajector in the foreground and the other being a landmark in the background (2008, 1999).

The second implication of UG is a result of its impact on SLA. As stated before, every language is governed by the rules of UG. These language-specific rules are often referred to as “parameters,” in contrast with language-universal rules often called “principles.” Since the ability to learn language is innate, children will learn the parameters of their language and internalize them. When an adult attempts to learn a second language, such as English, they are said to be “resetting” their parameters (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007). In other words, when students are learning another language, they are either consciously or subconsciously changing the rules about language.

During this time, the student will often form what is called an “interlanguage grammar.” Lydia White noted that students make many mistakes while learning a second language, but that these mistakes are not random. Instead, they appear to be rule-governed, though those rules may not appear in the L1 or the L2. The theory is that while they are learning the new language, they are accessing UG in order to “reset” the parameters of their first language. Thus, even though they are making mistakes, they are governing their mistakes according to UG (2003).

However, even though they are accessing UG while learning the new language, they are also applying some rules from their first language (L1) onto the target language (L2), a phenomenon known as learning transfer (James, 2007). According to Jie, this transfer can be either helpful or harmful. When it is harmful, it is also known as negative transfer or interference (2008). When a student’s native grammar clashes with the target

grammar, he or she can do one of four things, according to Jie: (1) over generalize the rules of L2 and apply them to related situations; (2) ignore the rules of L2 and use the rules of L1; (3) apply the rule incompletely; or (4) create an imaginary rule based on what he or she thinks the rule is in the L2 (2008). The mistakes that students make in relation to prepositions will vary according to their language backgrounds. However, their errors will "tell" the teacher where the root of the mistake lies. As educators, it is our job to assess the errors our students make so that we can present prepositions (or any grammatical unit) successfully and correctly (Jie, 2008).

Challenges of Prepositions

Prepositions are especially difficult for the English Language Learner (ELL) for a number of reasons. First, as stated earlier, because each language has its own set of rules, there are clash points when learning a second language (James, 2007; Jie, 2008). Prepositions are at the heart of one of these clash points. These positional words usually come before the noun in English, but in some languages they come after, making them postpositions. In addition, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out that the work of prepositions is often completed through the use of inflections in other languages (1999). Therefore, grammatically, prepositions do not behave in the same way for each language.

Second, there is a mismatch problem between English and other languages (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Usually when one is learning a second language, he or she will try to define an English word by its native equivalent. Therefore, a Hispanic will define *chair* as *silla* and *table* as *mesa*. This method works very well for content words, but is insufficient for function words. As a Spanish learner, I once tried to find a single translation for *at*. However, after translating only a few sentences, it was

clear that *at* could not be translated so simply. For example, the sentence "I'll meet you *at* the bus stop" would be translated "Encontraremos *a*l paradero de autobus" with *a* standing for *at*. Yet the sentence "She is *at* the house" would not be translated using the word *a*, but the word *en*: "Ella está *en* la casa." Furthermore, these examples are comparing two closely related languages. The disconnect between languages would be magnified if English were compared to a Slavik or even Asian language.

In addition, these are only location words. Temporal words, those involving time, have a similar problem. "He'll be there *at* 4:00" would be translated "Él estará allí *a* las 4:00" using the word *a* again. Yet "They'll see each other *at* Christmas" would be translated using *en*: "Los verán *en* Navidad." It must be understood that while *at* may be the same word, it has two different meanings in this situation: one meaning in space, and one in time. These two thoughts would be expressed four different ways in Spanish, two for space and two for time. So a Hispanic learning English must learn how to funnel his or her thoughts from four different meanings into two different meanings.[1]

Third, not only is there a mismatch problem between languages, but there is a perceived inconsistency in English itself (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Evans & Tyler, 2005). Certain prepositions can be applied in one form, but not another. For example, class can meet *on* Tuesday *at* 7:40, but it cannot meet *at* Tuesday *on* 7:40. Additionally, one could leave out the preposition *on* from this phrase, but could not omit *at* (class will meet Tuesday *at* 7:40). Similarly, I can meet you *in* but not *on* the house, while I can meet you *on* the corner, but not *in* it. Notice with these spatial examples, if you do tell someone you will meet him or her *on* the house, he or she will expect to find

[1] Korean has a similar yet opposite problem. Koreans actually only have one meaning for the four Spanish meanings. Therefore, a Korean learning English will have to learn to split the one meaning into two different ones in English.

you on the roof. If you tell someone to meet you in the corner, he or she might assume you are in time-out in the corner of a room. The ELL will not understand why the temporal prepositions can only be used with certain words. Nor will the ELL understand why changing the spatial preposition will change the meaning of the whole phrase. In addition, a student might question why changing the temporal preposition will make the sentence grammatically incorrect, but changing the spatial preposition changes the meaning. In truth, the native English speaker does not know the answer to these questions either. The native simply hears the incorrect sentence and thinks it sounds wrong.

Finally, the most frustrating challenge to prepositions is how they are taught, or rather, how they are not taught. Textbooks such as *Grammar Sense* by Susan Bland, *North Star: Reading and Writing* by Laurie Barton & Carolyn Sardinas, *How English Works* by Ann Raimes, *Grammar Dimensions 2* by Heidi Riggenbach and Virginia Samuda, *Grammar Dimensions 3* by Stephen Thewlis, and *Interactions* by Patricia Werner & John Nelson do not mention prepositions in any way, and therefore do not facilitate the teaching of them. Other textbooks such as *Grammar Links* by Linda Butler, *Grammar in Context* by Sandra Elbaum & Judi Pemán, and *Grammar Troublespots* by Ann Raimes only teach prepositions at certain levels and teach spatial and temporal uses separately from each other. In *Basic Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy and *Mosaic* by Patricia Werner & John Nelson, prepositions are used in conjunction with other grammatical units or are displayed, but they are not actually explained in any detail. When prepositions are taught in the text, they are usually allotted a page or less.

With no textbook to rely on, the teacher often encourages the student simply to memorize the prepositions (Evans & Tyler, 2005). However, it has already been

demonstrated that prepositions cannot be simply translated. Also, their seemingly haphazard nature prevents any easy memory tool. Thus the student is left to memorizing hundreds of different phrases, all of them containing prepositions.

Cognitive Linguistics

Since prepositions cause such a problem for ELLs, Evans and Tyler have proposed a new system for understanding prepositions: Cognitive Linguistics (CL). CL, in effect, reveals how we subconsciously think about prepositions. Each preposition has a central meaning, which is the mental picture of a spatial relationship (2005). Once the central meaning of a preposition is found, it becomes clear that the various meanings branch out in a polysemic network, what Evans and Tyler call *semantic networks* (2005). That is, there are various meanings that originate with the central meaning and are systematically related to that meaning. These different meanings are arranged in a web, or network, branching out from the central meaning.

For example, *at* means to exist in one exact location. Examine the network around the preposition, and one will find that some of the meanings are applied to time. So the central meaning of *at* is to exist in a certain point of space, but that can also be applied to time, meaning to exist in a certain point of time. Branch out even further, and the meanings will begin to apply to abstract concepts, such as "*at* the drop of a hat."[2]

This theory actually explains the apparent inconsistencies in English. If one examines the different relationships between meanings the prepositions are quite consistent (Evans & Tyler, 2005). Evans' and Tyler's explanation of the prepositions

[2] One reader has noted that this "abstract" meaning is still temporal. This simply means that on the web of meanings, this particular phrase is more closely related to the temporal *at*. However, it is on the outside fringes of the web (being abstract) because the entire expression is an English idiom, and "the drop of a hat" is not a certain time or time frame.

above and *over* can be used to illustrate this point. At first glance, these two words seem to mean the same thing: to be located vertically higher than something. Yet if this explanation was correct, we should be able to say, "The man walks *above* the bridge." However, a native speaker will object to this sentence. That is because *over* contains a sense of contact in the central meaning (though it does not necessitate such contact), but *above* prohibits any such contact. Therefore a man can walk *over* a bridge because that would mean he is physically touching the bridge as he walks on top of it. If he were walking *above* the bridge, he would have to be flying or walking on something higher than the bridge. Explained this way, *above* and *over* make much more sense. They can be interchanged in certain contexts (such as the picture that is *above* or *over* the mantle) but not in others, because the terms express approximate meanings (2005).

CL can also explain the mismatch problem between languages. As Evans and Tyler explain, since each central meaning of a preposition is spatial, the preposition can be viewed as a spatial scene. So we might view the preposition *in* like this:

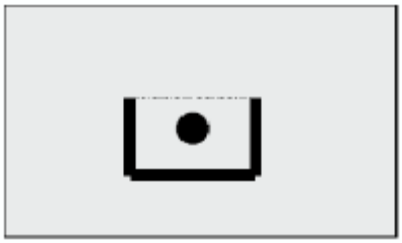

Figure 1: Proto-scene for English preposition *in* (Evans & Tyler, 2005, p. 36)

That is, the ball is *in* the box. Yet we could look at this picture another way (2005). Instead of saying "the ball is *in* the box," we could say "the box is *around* the ball."

Different languages emphasize spatial scenes differently (Evans & Tyler, 2005). While English may emphasize the *in* part of this picture, another language will emphasize the *around* part. This phenomenon is exactly what happens with French and English, as

Evans and Tyler illustrate. In English one would say, "The woman walks *in* the rain." But in French one would say, "La femme marche *sous* la pluie," where *sous* is generally translated *under*. As a woman walks outside while it is raining, she is indeed surrounded by rain and therefore *in* it. But she is also *under* it because the rain is pouring down from above (2005).

Evans and Tyler describe each language's vantage point as "privileged" or "conventionalized." In other words, each culture will take a certain, traditional view of the image. The way a culture views that scene will determine the way it is expressed in the language. So the emphasis by a culture and therefore by the language of that culture determines which preposition to use and how to use it. If two cultures/languages view a scene from different angles, they will use different prepositions; thus the mismatch problem (2005).

New Strategy

In their 2005 paper, Evans and Tyler state that their aim is not to produce a new pedagogy based on CL. Their paper simply explains semantic networks and how they function in the language. While I may not be designing a completely new pedagogy in this paper, it is my goal to design a new pedagogical strategy based on CL.

Since prepositions are centrally spatial images, according to CL, it would make sense to define prepositions in the classroom using pictures. It is certainly easier to show a student a picture of *on* than it is to say, "To be *on* something is to be located *over* it and still touching it." As stated earlier, in no case can one really define a preposition without using a substitute preposition. Also, using prepositions to define another preposition only complicates matters, for two reasons. First, if the student does not know the meaning of

the other prepositions, those will also have to be defined (which often puts the teacher in a spiral of explanations). Second, regardless of whether the student knows the meanings of these other words, if the teacher is using them to define the target word, then they would need to be synonymous. Some students may wonder why they need to use such a variety of prepositions. They might also fail to grasp the distinctions between the different words. In addition, it is often easier to explain a peripheral meaning after the student has grasped the central meaning.

These complications illustrate some of the reasons why a visual representation is so helpful. It is well said that a picture is worth a thousand words. If a picture could be drawn showing the action of the word, a teacher would not have to try and explain the word. She could simply point to the diagram and say, "This picture is the meaning of the preposition." Any needed clarification would be simple, because the teacher is discussing physical objects which appear in front of the student.

Therefore, I have designed several moving diagrams based on CL that can be used in a classroom. In this paper I have only shown the starting image. However, each of these figures represents a moving diagram on computer (unless otherwise noted). A digital copy of these diagrams is attached at the end of this document. They are as follows:

In

This preposition is fairly exact when talking about location and should be fairly easy to explain. However, if one were to try to explain this word to an ELL, he or she would find it quite difficult. To say "the ball is *in* the box" one might explain that the ball is surrounded by the box, but this explanation seems vaguer than the exact location

implied by the original statement. In addition, the meaning becomes much harder to define when one is speaking of time. One cannot really say that we are surrounded by time if we can leave *in* five minutes. For one, time is not tangible. Two, even though one may be able to argue that humans can indeed be surrounded by time, that is not the real meaning of the phrase "we can leave in five minutes." We do not mean that we can leave when we are surrounded by five minutes of time. Furthermore, we certainly cannot say we are surrounded by cases if when someone says "just *in* case." Indeed, we are surrounded only by one case, the one of which we are speaking. Yet even this vague explanation does not explain what we really mean by the phrase.

However, if the spatial meaning is so central to the preposition, we ought to be able to use that meaning to define other aspects of the preposition. But if a teacher defines the preposition using only words, the native will find it impossible to express all the meanings of the preposition. Instead, the teacher could point the students to Figure 2:

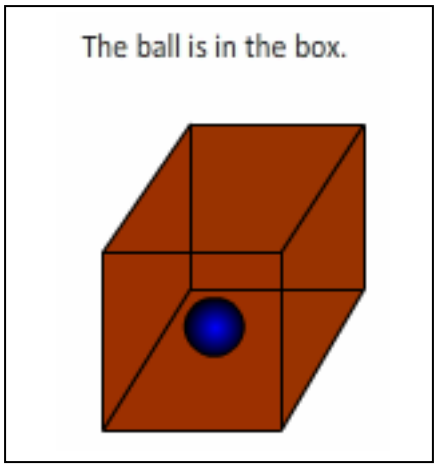

Figure 2

Now he or she can show the class that the ball is *in* the box. It is indeed a simple concept, one that ELLs could grasp immediately (incidentally, this diagram is one of the few still pictures because no movement is required to express the spatial meaning of this

word). We can still explain that the box is surrounding the ball, but that explanation is much more concrete now that we have a picture to which we can refer. I have actually used a picture similar to this to teach the preposition *in* to an eighth grade ESL student. I did not have to explain the preposition at all. As soon as he saw the picture he not only understood the word, but was later able to use it creatively in his own sentences.

After the ELLs can firmly grasp the meaning of this use of *in*, we can move on to time:

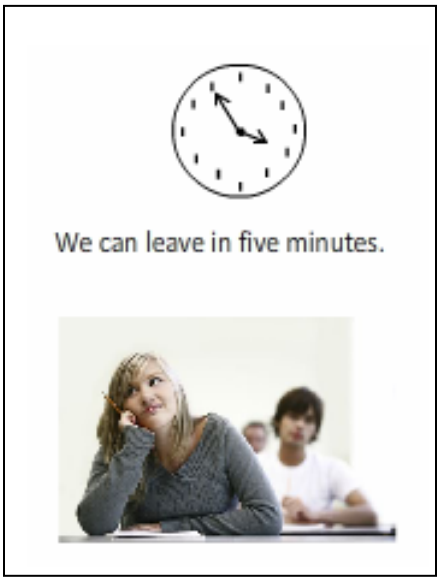

Figure 3

In this diagram, when the minute hand progresses by five minutes, the room is suddenly full of empty desks. As the students watch this short clip, they can see the concept of the temporal *in*, and with the help of the earlier picture, it is quite easy to explain. Imagine that our "box" (referring to Figure 2) is the time span of five minutes. Since we said *in* five minutes, we must stay inside our temporal box (the next five minutes). Before we get to the other side of the box (before five minutes has transpired) we will be able to leave.

To use these pictures to explain the phrase "just *in* case something happens" is still somewhat difficult, but much easier than it would have been otherwise. The teacher

might start by explaining that this phrase is preparing the listener for something bad to happen and the next phrase would most likely be directions for the listener to follow. The students should imagine that the directions are the ball and the bad event is the box. The listener will not follow the directions until the bad event begins to occur, and he or she (hopefully) will carry out the instructions before everything is over. Thus the directions are followed *in* the event (*in* case) something bad happens.

On

On, like *in*, seems rather concrete and easy to explain until one tries to do so. If we say "the ball is *on* the box" we mean that the ball is located vertically above the box, but is still touching it. So if someone tells a student that he or she is *on* time, does that mean that the student is sitting on top of a clock touching the hour and minute hands? Of course not, but it is hard to explain what we mean by that phrase. It is best to start with the location:

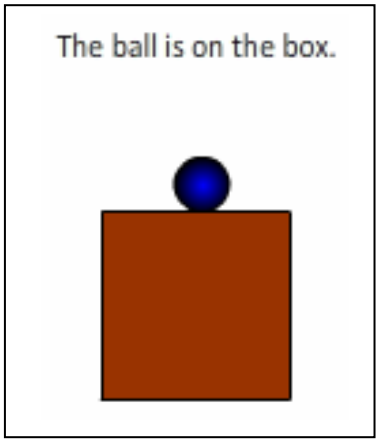

Figure 4

Here the students can quickly see the full meaning of the preposition. The ball has contact with the object, but is above or over it. Again, because there is no movement implied in this preposition, the diagram is still. I also used a similar diagram in my lesson with the

ESL student, and he again understood the meaning immediately. I can only imagine the trouble I would have had explaining this word without the picture!

Temporally, however, things are not so easy. *On* is a rather tricky preposition. We can say "Be *on* time" but we cannot say "Arrive *on* 3:00." We can say "Christmas is *on* December 25th" but we cannot say "Christmas is *on* December." We can say "*On* Friday" but not "*On* the morning." In all of these cases, *on* is substituted with *in* or *at*. It would be nice if we could say that the three words are on a continuum, such as *in* is the most specific and *on* is the most general. Unfortunately, one cannot be more specific than "*On* time." If we were to reverse the spectrum, making *on* the most specific and *in* the most general, one could argue that "*In* the next five minutes" is much more specific than "*O*n Friday." In any case, the specificity of each preposition is debatable, so we cannot arrange these words on a continuum. As interesting as it would be to research this topic, that is not within the scope of this paper. We must instead be satisfied with the fact that these three words are sometimes interconnected, and *on* is usually used in reference to a calendar, instead of a clock. Therefore we shall represent *on* with Figure 5:

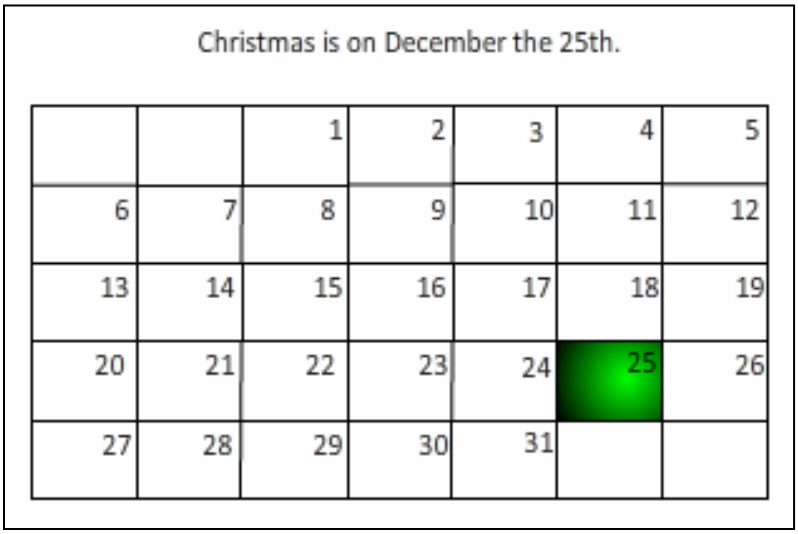

Figure 5

As the teacher shows this stationary diagram, it is enough to say that the only time this word is applied to a clock is when we say "*On* time." Beyond that, we use it with a calendar.

At

At is in some ways just as difficult as *on*. Where *on* is very specific spatially, *at* can be rather elusive. But while *on* is nearly impossible temporally, *at* is rather exact. Let us consider the spatial meaning of this word first. If someone were to tell a child that his ball was *at* the park, the reference could be to a number of locations. First, the ball could be located anywhere inside the park. Or, the person could mean that the ball is somewhere near the park, as illustrated in Figure 6:

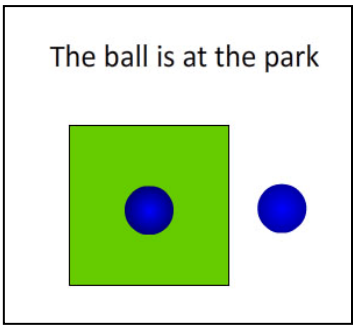

Figure 6

The question that the ELL is most likely to have is how one knows whether the ball will be in or near the park. Furthermore, why would we use such a vague preposition when we could use a more specific one?

The answers to these two questions are actually intertwined. Most people use *at* precisely when they mean to be vague. If a husband calls his wife from work and asks where she is, she might reply "*At* home." He does not need to know whether she is in the laundry room or in the garden or in the nursery. It is enough to know that she is in the vicinity of the house. Furthermore, if a friend calls wanting to meet for lunch and the two

of them are trying to find a meeting place, one might say she is *at* DeMoss and the other might say she is *at* North Campus. In these cases, the listener only wants to know the relative location of the speaker, so *at* is sufficient.

In fact, in some cases, if the speaker is too specific ("I'm in the library") the listener may become confused. Which library does the speaker mean? Is he or she at the one on campus, or the public library? Or could the speaker even mean his or her personal library? So something more vague, like "I'm *at* school," will be a better indicator of where the speaker is. Once the listener is closer to the speaker, then the speaker can switch to more specific prepositions, like "I'm in the library."

However, as noted earlier, *at* is much more specific in relation to time. As stated earlier, *at* sometimes takes the place of *on* where an ELL may not expect it. Fortunately, *at* is only used in one type of temporal phrase, as illustrated in Figure 7:

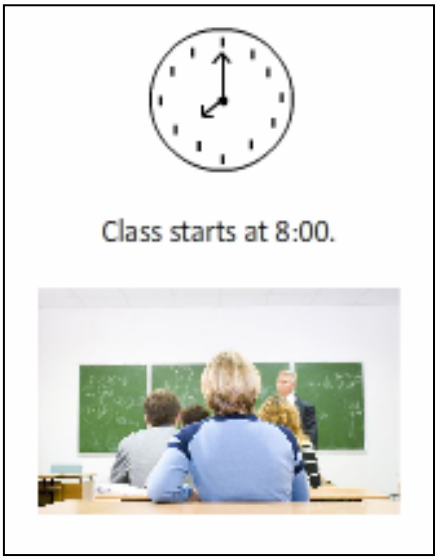

Figure 7

The only time we use *at* temporally is when we are referring to a very specific time during the day. Usually this time is a specific minute (8:00, 8:30, etc.).

On some rare occasions *at* can also refer to time-marking events (*at* sunrise, *at* full moon, *at* the dawn of the millennium). Yet note that before clocks, sunrise and full moon were ways of telling specific time. One might suggest, however, that phrases such as "*at* the dawn of the millennium" or "*at* the dawn of time" are anything but exact. Yet remember that in some cases, the spatial meaning was intentionally vague because of the distance between the trajector and the landmark (the husband calling his wife at home, for example). We could say that we have the same situation here: we are so far removed from the "dawn of time" that *at* is as exact as we need to be. So while the spatial *at* is hard to explain, the temporal *at* is only used with very specific times.[3]

Through

As we advance in the list of prepositions, the concepts become slightly more abstract. *Through* is still rather simple to understand, but is not as exact or specific as the earlier prepositions. To go *through* something is to start at one end of the object and continue, generally in a straight line, until you reach the other side. This is shown in Figure 8:

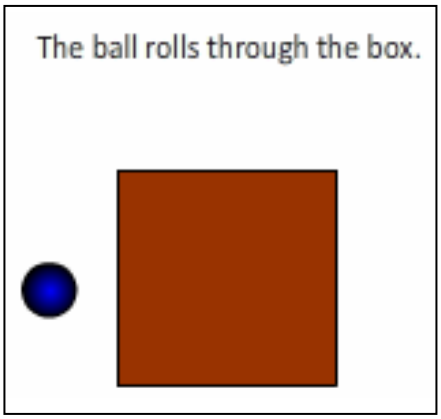

Figure 8

[3] One reader has noted that *at* can also be used in the phrase "*at* approximately 5:00." This would indeed be a none-specific time, but note that the ambiguousness of the time is not carried in the word *at*, but the word *approximately*.

In this model, the ball starts on one side of the box and rolls inside and out again on the other side.

So what would it mean to see through someone's deception? Obviously we do not mean that we can literally see through the person or the deception. This model can help explain seeing *through* someone's deception. As the ball rolls *through* the box, it goes past both the top and bottom of the box. If the ball had eyes, it could see the entire box from the inside as it rolled *through* it. If we can see *through* someone's deception, we can see the deception, or the actions they want others to see (the front of the box); the fact that their actions are deceptive (the inside of the box); and their motives behind the deception (the back of the box).

When referring to time, the general idea is the same: start before a certain time, and continue the action until after the time is completed. Look at Figure 9:

Figure 9

The grayed minute hand shows when she should have woken up, while the black minute hand shows what time it is. As far as time is concerned, *through* is almost the opposite of

in. The preposition *in* means to be contained within a certain time limit; but *through* means to extend past that limit, usually on either side. The action started before the limit and ended after it.

About

About, compared to the earlier prepositions, is quite elusive. A man looking for his tie could be dashing *about* the house. It is *about* a twenty-minute drive back home. Some friends could be talking *about* a movie. The teacher might be able to explain how one might dash *about* the house, going from room to room in no particular direction; but that does not seem to relate to talking *about* a movie. An ELL student who heard the earlier definition might think that to talk *about* a movie would mean to talk about several different movies, all at once, in no particular order. Or the conversation might focus on the movie theater or all the movies concerning a particular actor. The same problem applies to time. If a thirty mile drive lasts *about* twenty minutes, then maybe that means that during the drive, you stopped at five different stores and the whole trip took you twenty minutes! Even if the ELL could grasp the meaning in something a native speaker says, he or she may still have trouble using the word correctly. Using these examples, a student may say "I went *about* my class" meaning that the student went to class, but the class let out early.

Instead, the teacher could point the students to Figure 10:

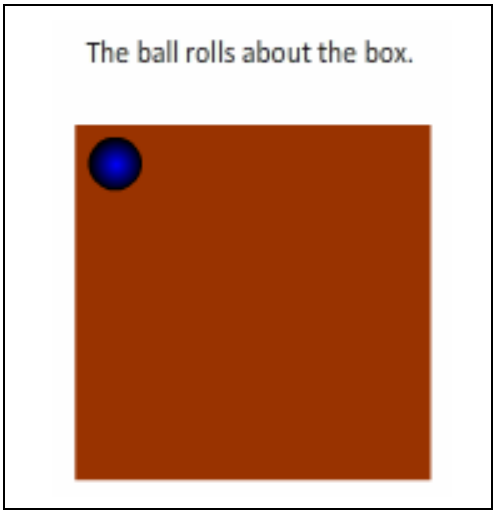

Figure 10

When the teacher clicks this figure, the ball will roll in different directions throughout the box. Just as the man dashes *about* the house, the ball rolls *about* the box. Then the teacher can explain how this meaning relates to a drive that lasts *about* twenty minutes by relating this diagram to the next one:

Figure 11

In this model, the minute hand will make its way around the clock face, stopping just shy of the 12. Using the two diagrams, the teacher can compare the similarities. Both diagrams show an approximation and indirectness, yet both are contained in certain

parameters (the ball can roll anywhere in the box, but it has to stay in the box; class may not be exactly an hour, but it has to be within five minutes of that timeframe). *About* is a flexible word, but still conforms to the subject at hand[4].

Now the teacher can draw that relationship to a conversation about a movie. If *about* is contained within the particular subject being discussed, then the conversation necessarily needs to focus on the movie. Yet because the word is flexible, it can mean that the group would talk about different aspects of the movie at any given time during the conversation. They might talk briefly about the actors and the theater, but since these are on the fringe of the topic at hand, these discussions would be brief. Since the plot is central to the movie, the plot would most likely be a major focus of the conversation.

Around

Around would be equally difficult because it is equally ambiguous. In fact, it might be harder because around is so closely related to *about*. In some cases, they are even synonymous: "I walked *about* the yard" versus "I walked *around* the yard." Yet the native speaker will immediately recognize a difference in these two sentences (a difference that the ELL will not recognize). Even though the native can recognize the difference, it takes much effort (and even a little training!) to express this difference.

After much thought, the native might express the thought that *about* implies a sense of zigzagging back and forth in the yard. In contrast, *around* implies a circular motion, closer to the outer rim of the yard. However, there is a further complication with this word. While *about* generally remained *inside* certain boundaries, *around* is often applied to the outside of those boundaries. For example: "We walked *around* the house"

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[4] Notice this flexibility in the word *about* allows it to be used synonymously with the word *approximately*. However, just because these two words are sometimes used interchangeably, does not mean that *about* is not a preposition or that *approximately* is. It simply means that these two words are related.

can mean that we walked throughout the house, looking in each of the different rooms; or, it can mean that we took a walk outside the perimeter of the house. Even natives are often confused on this point and require clarification.

Then apply this definition to time: We will meet *around* 3:00. The ELL will naturally ask if that is the same as meeting *about* 3:00. Well, yes, but it does not sound right. Furthermore, the student must eventually relate these meanings to the phrase, "We found a way *around* the rules." Surely this sentence must mean that we learned how to read the rules in a circular, yet indirect manner.

Moving models will again help clear up the confusion. Look at Figure 12:

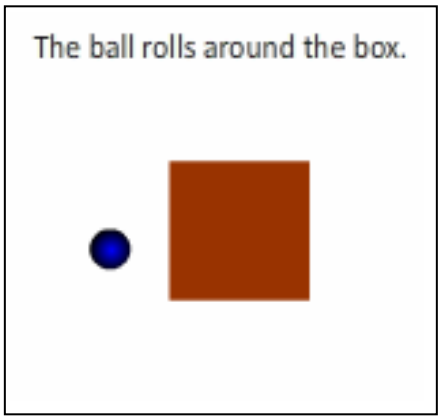

Figure 12

In this case, the ball circles the box on the outside. This diagram effectively shows that the ball rolls in a circular fashion along the edges of the box, usually on the outside but occasionally on the inside. The ball eventually goes past every side of the box. The preposition again implies flexibility with boundaries, but the diagram shows the difference in movement and boundaries far better than words could.

Applied to time, it would look like this:

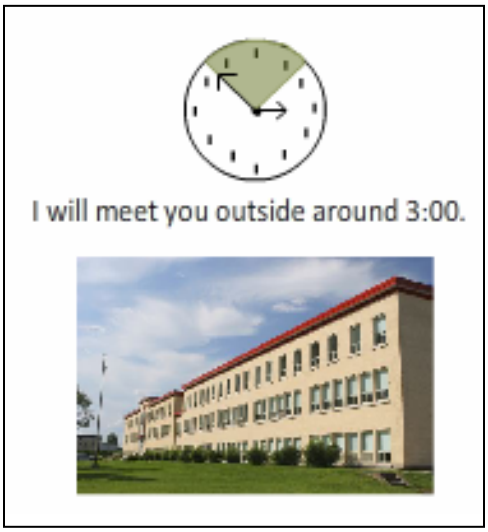

Figure 13

The minute hand sways back and forth through the gray area. The idea is similar to *about*; it is approximate, but is very close to a certain point in time. It could be said that the minute hand is hovering on the outskirts of the 3:00 time.

Once these concrete definitions are firmly established, it is easier to relate them to the more abstract concept of working *around* the rules. If a group works around the rules, they are completing the same goal (just as the point in time is the same), but they are going just outside the boundaries (just as the ball rolled outside of the box). Notice how the two diagrams can be weaved together to illustrate the more abstract meaning. With all of these prepositions, only two diagrams can be used together to represent almost any meaning of the word.

For

For is different from all the previous prepositions because it does not denote a location or time so much as a purpose. You can wait in line *for* food *for* fifteen minutes. You can buy a present *for* Maggy *for* her birthday. Even more confusing: you can wait up

for Santa Claus. That last phrase does not seem to imply where or when you are waiting. The following diagrams may help:

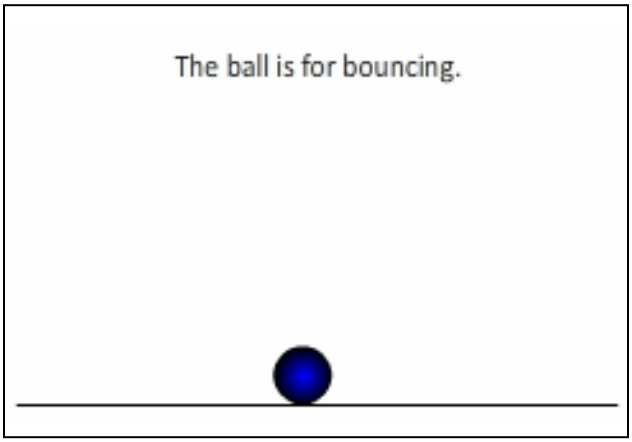

Figure 14

In this diagram, the ball bounces up and down several times. The ball is not at the location *for*, it is doing the action. Bouncing is the ball's purpose. The illustration of time solidifies this concept:

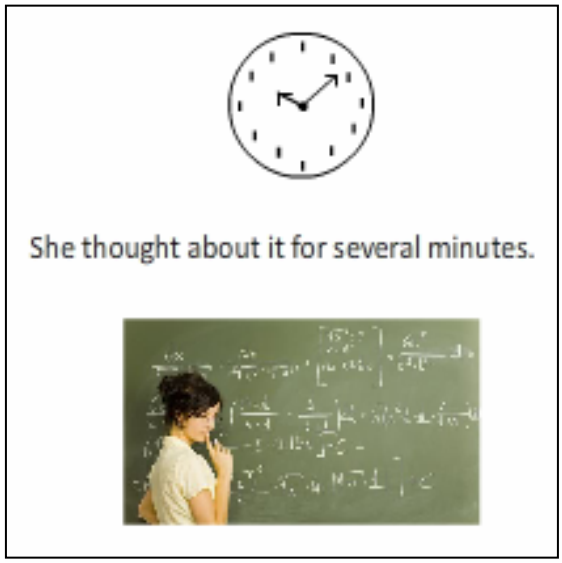

Figure 15

Thinking about something *for* several minutes is not talking about the amount of time she was thinking. It is talking about what she was doing during those minutes. So the purpose of those several minutes was *for* thinking.

So if someone is waiting in line *for* food *for* fifteen minutes, there are two purposes expressed. Food is the purpose of waiting and waiting is the purpose of those fifteen minutes. In the same way, the purpose of the present is to give it to Maggy and the purpose of giving a present at all is Maggy's birthday. Suddenly waiting *for* Santa Claus makes more sense: seeing him is the purpose of waiting.

The use of these models is twofold. First, as has been repeated throughout this section, these models are a teaching tool. Teachers can use these models to properly introduce and explain prepositions to a class. Furthermore, as the class practices using and working with prepositions, the teacher (and the students) can refer back to these models in order to clarify the meaning of each word.

Second, these models can be used as memory tools. Such a memory tool will be especially effective for visual students. When a student encounters a preposition outside of the classroom, he or she could remember these diagrams. By remembering the different pictures and actions, the student can remember the central meaning of the word.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to raise some awareness concerning prepositions and second language acquisition. Prepositions are quite difficult for the ELL to grasp for many reasons. First, the nature of second language acquisition creates certain clash points. Prepositions are part of these clash points because there is a mismatch between languages and because there is a perceived inconsistency in English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Yet, even though prepositions are one of the most difficult points in the English language, few textbooks address the problem. The current pedagogy lacks a good strategy for addressing this grammatical point.

In response to these problems, Evans & Tyler have designed a theoretical framework known as Cognitive Linguistics. This theory states that each preposition has a central meaning that can be represented with a visual schema. The different peripheral meanings of the preposition then branch out from this central meaning. Therefore the meanings of each preposition are related to each other and are thus related back to the original image (2005).

Based upon this theoretical framework, I have suggested a new strategy and have shown how it can be used in a classroom. I have done so through the use of seven different prepositions. I have also attempted to prove that this strategy is better than simple memorization.

However, it should be recognized that these models are still in the beginning stages. Only seven prepositions are represented here, though there are forty-eight prepositions in the English language (Muller, 2009). One result of this paper may be the designing of models for all the prepositions in the English language. Also, only a few of these models have actually been tried in a classroom, and those tried were the still diagrams, not the moving ones. A fruitful venture would be to write out lesson plans using these models and employ them in the classroom. Using the models in a classroom would be a practical test of the ideas presented here.

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