

**TEACHING PREPOSITIONS TO ESP LEARNERS / ENSEIGNER LES  
PRÉPOSITIONS AUX APPRENANTS EN FOS / PREDAREA  
PREPOZIȚIEI ÎN CADRUL CURSURILOR DE LIMBĂ ENGLEZĂ  
PENTRU SCOPURI SPECIFICE<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *Preposition usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native speakers to master. Preposition errors account for a high proportion of ESL grammar errors. When you think of prepositions, dry grammar drills come to your mind. Because they are somewhat vague, learning how to use prepositions correctly in sentences takes time and practice. As 1:1 translation is often impossible when dealing with prepositions, even the most advanced English learners may find them confusing at first.*

**Keywords:** *prepositions, difficulties, mistakes, strategies, context*

Prepositions are very tricky in English. Native speakers of Romanian encounter a lot of difficulties in their attempt to learn how to use English prepositions correctly. Although they are short and limited in number, they are difficult to use for several reasons. First, they usually have several different meanings. Second, there is no logical way you can decide which preposition goes with a certain adjective, verb or noun. Finally, preposition error occurs because sometimes they are radically different from the manner of expression in the learners' native language. According to Bruckfield (2012), prepositions are the most difficult part of speech in the English language, but, fortunately, we can distinguish them by their function and organise them into specific groups of situations and contexts.

How are prepositions taught?

Prepositions express a relationship between entities: it may be a relationship of space (between two objects), a relationship in time (between two events), a relationship of cause or one of instrument. English prepositions are usually short, single-syllable or two-syllable words, and rarely stressed when pronounced.

The traditional method of teaching prepositions is through explicit grammar instruction. As Lam (2009) shows, students learn prepositions individually within context. The main drawback of this method is the learners' lack of confidence in their ability to use prepositions correctly. A more successful method of teaching prepositions consists in the use of collocations. Students will get a good grasp of prepositions if they avoid learning them individually and try to learn them in combination with other words. For instance, they are more likely to learn how to use the preposition *at* if they try to remember as many combinations with this word as possible (*at work, at school, mad at, at the moment, at night, pleased at, amused at, at the age of* etc). Trying to learn its various meanings on their own is not a good option.

A third method of teaching prepositions is by familiarising learners with the most common meaning of a preposition. According to this theory, the polysemous nature of prepositions can be explained through analysis of the prototypical meaning, all non-prototypical meanings being related to the prototype (Lindstromberg, 1996).

How much importance should be given to the teaching of prepositions in ESP classes?

ESP classes do not concentrate on grammar teaching, yet it is not appropriate to consider it as being "outside the remit of ESP. Where students have grammatical difficulties that interfere with the essentially productive skills of speaking and writing, or the essentially receptive skills of listening and reading, it is necessary to pay some attention to those difficulties" (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:74).

Another question that arises when speaking about the importance of grammar teaching in ESP classes is whether fluency is more important than accuracy or vice-versa.

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Fluency is the flow with which you express your ideas, especially when speaking. In an academic or professional setting, fluency is an important skill to master since it makes the difference between an effective oral presentation and an unsuccessful one. A few grammar mistakes won't hinder the speaker from getting his/her ideas across.

Accuracy, on the other hand, shows the speaker's ability to use the language correctly. This skill is essential in the workplace in order to avoid mistakes which might be considered unprofessional.

Although most ESP learners focus more on fluency than on accuracy, they should be aware of the importance of speaking English correctly. Most people tend to hold interlocutors who speak correct English in higher esteem than those who make mistakes. Someone who says "He travelled with the bus and reached to the station early" will be regarded as a poor communicator.

Why are prepositions problematic?

Prepositions are difficult to master because they perform a lot of complex roles. English prepositions are part of adjuncts, they mark the arguments of predicates, and they combine with other parts of speech to express new meanings. They may seem insignificant at first sight, but they play a very important role in explaining the relationship between words in a sentence. Their importance is also shown by their high frequency in English. There is at least one preposition in most sentences. *Of*, *to* and *in* are three of the ten most frequently used words in the English language.

Difficulties in teaching/learning prepositions

As Lynch (2010) shows, English prepositions are so illogical to speakers of other languages that they do not lend themselves to being understood, even in context. Both ESP learners and ESP teachers find them challenging because of their idiosyncratic behaviour which does not follow any predictable pattern even across nearly identical contexts. Thus, we say "He is independent *of* his parents", but "He is dependent *on* his wife"; "I study *in* London", but "I study *at* the University of Alabama".

Most prepositions are polysemous. As Saint-Dizier (2006) shows, prepositions are highly polysemic and enter into a large number of metonymies and metaphors. *In*, for instance, has a lot of different meanings. Here are some of them:

1. contained by; within: I keep my money *in* a drawer.
2. not outside (with the names of countries, towns and villages): They live *in* Sweden.
3. attending for the usual purpose (with the name of a place connected with an activity): His uncle is *in* hospital with a broken arm.
4. being included as part of: I read an interesting article *in* yesterday's newspaper.
5. wearing: The woman *in* blue is my boss.
6. with; by means of: You have to write it *in* pencil.
7. at some point during; at the time of: He was born *in* 1988.

However, some prepositions such as *during*, *concerning*, *via* etc have very restricted uses.

Certain prepositions can also be used as adverbs and particles, which may be confusing for ESP learners. *Along*, for instance, is used as a preposition with three meanings:

1. from one end to another: They are walking *along* the street.
2. in a line next to the length of: There are trees *along* the river bank.
3. at a point on the length of: His room is *along* this passage.

*Along* is also used as an adverb, which causes confusion: We went to London and we took our parents *along*.

Two or more prepositions can be used with the same meaning:

- He jumped *on/onto* the horse.  
*On/Upon* hearing the news, she burst into tears.

The use of prepositions may vary from British English to American English. Here are some such differences: in each team (BrE) - on each team (AmE), at weekends (BrE) - on

weekends (AmE). ESP students are sometimes confused by the usage of different prepositions in formal and informal styles. *Notwithstanding*, for instance, is a preposition which is preferred in formal language.

Common mistakes with prepositions in ESP classes

A preposition error consists in the selection of a wrong preposition (Lisa arrived *at* London yesterday), in the use of a preposition in a context where there is no need for a preposition (They entered *into* the house) or in the absence of a preposition in a context where it is necessary (She is keen diving).

One of the reasons learners make mistakes with prepositions has to do with English itself. As Lindstromberg shows, a learner may say *by random* instead of *at random* because the two prepositions sometimes have similar meanings or “because the phrases *by chance* and *at random* are similar enough in meaning to induce unintentional cross-association of words” (2010:5).

Another cause of ESP learners’ mistakes is native language interference in the use of English prepositions. L2 learners are inevitably affected by their L1. Such errors, called negative transfer errors, are defined as errors which learners make in L2, but whose reasons can be found in the structures of their L1 (Lott, 1983). Such mistakes are frequently made by Romanian learners.

Radiation from the sun can be converted *in* electricity. (*in* instead of *to* or *into*)

We have to admit we don’t approve *with* the new system. (*with* instead of *of*)

He has been working *like* an engineer since he moved to London. (*like* instead of *as*)

I’ll be working *at* my project all next week. (*at* instead of *on*)

Romanian learners have a lot of trouble with dependent prepositions. They tend to say *arrive to*, *depend of*, *graduate of*, *listen somebody or something*, *live at*, *be responsible with*, *be in charge with*, *wait somebody or something* instead of *arrive at/in*, *depend on*, *graduate from*, *listen to somebody or something*, *live in*, *be responsible for*, *be in charge of*, *wait for somebody or something*.

ESP learners also have difficulty in distinguishing between prepositions which they find similar in any context. For instance, *above* and *over* can often be used in the same way, but only *over* is used if there is an idea of movement or covering.

There is a painting *above/over* the fireplace. (correct)

The birds flew *above* the sea. (incorrect)

The birds flew *over* the sea. (correct)

When dealing with such prepositions as *under*, *below*, *beneath* and *underneath*, ESP learners fail to see which one is the most appropriate in a given context.

The box is *under* the blanket. (one thing is directly below another thing)

There is a lake *below* the village. (one thing is in a lower position than another)

The submarine waited, far *beneath* the ship. (*beneath* is very similar to *under*, but it suggests that the two objects are not very close to each object)

The woman was wearing a red coat with a white dress *underneath*. (*underneath* is used instead of *under* at the end of a sentence)

Learners find it hard to understand how a preposition can be placed at the end of a sentence, away from its object. Thus, they have a tendency to omit the preposition in such a sentence as

*Which factory are they talking about?*

Phrasal verbs are also difficult to learn and teach. They are tricky verbs that mean one thing when paired with one preposition and a completely different thing when paired with another preposition. Giving students long lists of phrasal verbs to study is not a solution. It is much easier for learners to incorporate them into their vocabulary if teachers organise them into logical groups either around the same preposition or the same topic.

Learners need to learn which prepositions go with which adjectives, as meaning can change when a different preposition is used.

He is *good at* languages. (*good* means *clever, skilful*)

She has always been *good to* me. (*good* means *kind, helpful*)

It's not a good film, but it's *good for* a laugh. (*good* means *likely to produce*)

I am *good with* animals. (*being good with* means *getting along with*)

The fact that both *in the street* and *on the street* are possible often lead students to believe that the same is true for *in the pavement* and *on the pavement* when, in fact, only the latter variant is correct.

Students find it hard to see the difference between *in the margin* and *on the margin*, the former being used to refer to a concrete position (on a page) whereas the latter is used to refer to a metaphorical position (in society).

She had scribbled some words *in the margin* of the book.

They want to hire these youths living *on the margin* of society.

How to teach prepositions

ESP teachers should ensure that learners are able to use as many prepositions as possible in various contexts. In this way, they will acquire their common meanings as well as their finer shades of meaning.

Students should be encouraged to use dictionaries whenever they are not sure which preposition goes with a certain noun, adjective or verb. When they learn a new adjective, for instance, they shouldn't learn it on its own, but in combination with the preposition that goes with it: *confident in, surprised at/by, addicted to*.

ESP teachers can teach prepositions of time, place and movement separately. *In*, for instance, has temporal and spatial meanings. Teaching all its meanings at the same time might lead to confusion. It is much easier for students to learn its spatial meanings first and then its temporal meanings. The less difficult prepositions should have priority over the more difficult ones, just like the most frequently used ones should be taught before the less common ones.

### Conclusions

Prepositions may be said to be the most important connectors of words and ideas in English. They are crucial because they have a direct impact on the meaning of a sentence. A preposition incorrectly used in a sentence can completely alter the intended meaning of the sentence, therefore teachers should think very carefully about how to incorporate the teaching and learning of prepositions into their classes.

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