Theories and Approaches of Teaching English Prepositions

Noor Jahan
Part-time Lecturer, Institute of Modern Languages
University of Chittagong
Corresponding Email: njshu09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Grammatical competence is one of the prerequisites of communicative competence. So learning the grammar may be considered one of the fundamental needs. Prepositions are one of the grammatical elements of English which are undoubtedly challenging for the ESL/EFL learners around the world. So, it is essential to know the theories and approaches of teaching prepositions, following which the problems of learners may be reduced. In this paper, the traditional approach, the Collocation Approach, the Cognitive Approach and some other theories and approaches have been discussed briefly so that a certain awareness regarding the teaching of prepositions can be created.

Keywords: Prepositions, EFL/ESL learners, traditional approach, collocation approach, cognitive approach

1. Introduction

The world is becoming a global village and the need for learning English is also increasing rapidly. Because of the cultural, political and economic background, English has got the privilege of being an international language (Jenkins, 2000; Modiano, 1999; Widdowson, 1994). It is also referred to as a global language (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997), a world language (Brutt-Griffler, 2002) and a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2004) by some of the scholars. And as a result, the demand for learning English is growing very fast. So, like many other Asian countries, English is playing a vital role in the education system of Bangladesh and English is taught as a foreign language.
In our country, Communicative Approach is claimed to be followed to teach English. According to Canale and Swain (1980), an integral part of ‘communicative competence’ is grammatical competence. Without the knowledge of grammar, it is not possible to have an effective communication. Moreover Lado (1957) explains, "In the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning....Those elements that are similar to (the learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those that are different will be difficult" (pp.1-2).

According to Chodorow, Gamon and Tetreault (2010), while learning English as a second or foreign language, the non-native speakers often use prepositions and articles incorrectly. They face difficulties in using them appropriately among all the grammatical elements of English. In a similar vein, Flowerdew (2009) and Hunston (2008) claim that prepositions are the most essential words in English language.

Despite being small in size and looking not so prominent, prepositions have high significance in the practice of English language. And so, they are reasonably called ‘the biggest little words in English’ (Mus, 2012). In this regard, Gethinand Gunnemark (1996) claim "Prepositions are famous for being used in their own special and 'different' way in each language, and cause great difficulties to students all over the world" (p.18).

While learning a second language, the use of prepositions becomes the most problematic area for ESL learners and that is why these are very familiar items to them (Lindstromberg, 1991; Capel, 1993; Gass and Selinker, 2008). Also Takahaski (1969) states that, there is no rational description or conceptual structure of using English prepositions given by native speakers or instructors or researchers. Therefore, mastering the varieties in functions and uses of prepositions is one of the
most difficult tasks for a learner of English as a second language.

As we can see that prepositions are very problematic for the second language and/or foreign language learners, it is important to teach them well. If the prepositions are taught well, then it will be possible for the learners to diminish the difficulties or challenges faced by them. The aim of this study is to discuss the various approaches that can be used in teaching English prepositions only. Hopefully, it will create awareness among the teachers so that they may follow the suitable approach/ies to apply while teaching prepositions.

To teach and learn prepositions successfully, one must have good conceptualization of the contexts of using them. Having this conceptualization is very challenging, which is why it is a highly focused area. Pittman (1966) says that, to the teachers and students of English language, prepositions are not only difficult but also highly confusing in usage.

Koffi (2010) claims that compared with most other languages, English has a higher number of prepositions. The number of English prepositions is 60 to 70; whereas Bangla does not have any. In Bangla there are only post positions. So, to ensure effective learning of English, learners need well considered approaches for a clear concept of the mechanics or functions of the prepositions.

Researchers do not agree on a specific strategy for teaching prepositions. But it is clear to us that traditional manners of teaching them are not creating significant impact in this area and are not sufficient. The reasons will be explained in different sections later on.

There are some teaching strategies such as Collocation Approach, Proto-type Approach, and Cognitive Approach.
These have been developed to help the learner get out of this dilemma and use the prepositions correctly. But these new methods have shortcomings too. Among the approaches, the most notable ones in this field are discussed briefly.

2. The Traditional Approach

The traditional way of teaching prepositions is done by using structures from grammar and various contexts. Lam (2009) describes that in this approach prepositions are learned by following different contexts as there is no certain predictability. Here, it is challenging for the learners to build a good competence in the second language because of the explicit presentation of grammatical rules of prepositions followed. In this approach, they are taught in an isolated manner and fragmentally, without explaining the context and meaning. The learners generally try to remember the use of prepositions by practicing and memorizing them. Whenever they are needed, the learners try to recall them but memorizing such a long list is actually out of the range of the learners. They do not understand many of those in the contexts they are used in English.

This approach has been much criticized for the above mentioned reasons. As learners do not go through the process of being conceptualized, they find themselves unable in using the appropriate prepositions in their own writings and speeches. So they become inefficient in their real life use. Expanding the idea, Lam (2009) explains, “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).

There are various teaching approaches which have been proposed to lessen the deficiencies in the use of prepositions to EFL/ESL learners. The traditional method is blamed for
creating the idea among the learners that the use of prepositions is very much unpredictable and for this reason explicit teaching is appropriate for teaching elements like prepositions. Again Lam (2009) claims that the retentiveness rate of the learners is the least and they achieve diminutive confidence while teaching of prepositions is done following the traditional approach.

3. The Collocation Approach

Among many alternative methods to the traditional method for teaching prepositions, the use of collocation is a mentionable one. Instead of teaching prepositions individually, here prepositions are taught through ‘chunks,’ which are used indistinguishably with words like ‘word co-occurrence (WCO),’ ‘formulaic sequence,’ and ‘collocation’ or words that often occur together.

With regard to prepositions, phrasal verbs are included in these “chunks”. For instance, as a substitute of teaching prepositions as a single entity, learners can be taught phrasal verbs “to move on”, “to hang on”, “to hold on”, “to wait on”, “to log on” etc. Besides phrasal verbs, prepositional phrases can also be taught as formulaic sequences, such as “on schedule”, “on screen”, “on time” etc (Mueller, 2011). In addition, Mueller (2011) also says, “Such associative learning is necessary to account for the acquisition of irregular forms and rigidly fixed idioms” (p. 481). This kind of associative learning is necessary in the acquisition of idioms and irregular forms. According to frequency-based learning, naturally humans process groups of words as single units and this approach is grounded on that fact.

The use of concordance and corpora are learned through the collocation approach of teaching prepositions easily. In digital database the analysis of lexical patterns and structures is
called concordancing. Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) conducted a study regarding this using Brown Corpus Online where two different groups were used and one of the groups with DDL (Data Driven Language) technique and another with traditional technique. They found out that learners who were using DDL became enthusiastic in learning prepositions and started learning though self-discovery. So it was more effective than the traditional one. Collocation approach is very effective for children as they understand them as single words. Though in the beginning they are remembered as chunks, gradually the learners start to explore them by intimate analyzing.

Collocation has also been criticized. Lindstromberg (1996), for example, argues that this view is extravagant in the use of learners’ time and does not count many unifying views about different relations connected to the same word.

4. The Cognitive Approach

The Cognitive Approach is based on Lakoff (1987)’s Cognitive Linguistics (CL) Theory. It was offered as a substitute point of view in Cognitive Approach by Evans and Tyler (2005). Rohlfing (2001) mentions that as different languages have different ways to categorize the sense of space, they differ significantly while classifying spatial configurations too. In this approach the learners are approached with the primary meanings of prepositions, their spatial uses and their connection to those which are metaphorized.

Song, Schnotz and Juchem-Grundmann (2015) conducted a research where they used the Cognitive Approach for teaching prepositions to the learners of an experimental group. And the control group was taught using traditional method. This experiment was done by using images and pictures to find out the different conceptual use of prepositions. The results showed that teaching prepositions, maintaining the basic
concept of cognitive learning is more effective than the concepts of traditional learning.

The concepts from the Cognitive Approach play an important role in the teaching and learning of prepositions. They are discussed here briefly:

**Categorization**

Classification is considered to be a kind of mental process. It helps us to make resemblance among the varieties in the world. At present, this mental process of classification is known as categorization (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006). Categorization is the initial step of the process which we go through starting with thinking and ending with speech.

It plays a very important role in the cognition as it is the ability to categorize. It means it helps us to understand the belongingness of one specific item to a particular category. It is an intrinsic higher cognitive activity and helps us to perceive thought and act though maximum time it happens automatically and subconsciously. It can sometimes lead to mistakes about understanding our categories of physical and abstract entities. The learning process needs conceptual clarity which is done by classifying our experiences and being able to recognize them differently. If we are unable to do that, our experience will be chaotic and we would not be able to learn anything.

From the starting point, the process of categorization works by using category as its product to understand concept, lexical meaning and the overall use of language (Zhang, 2011). There are two models for categorization:
The notion of ‘representation of conceptualization’ was introduced by attempting to translate the prepositions of locations using English and French (Grimaud, 1988; Japkowicz and Wiebe, 1991). Many words in many languages must be used with specific prepositions. It is highly improbable that languages would conceptualize or allow similar prepositions. Where categorization can be helpful by making categories among similar prepositions and understanding the prepositions of both the languages in a better way. While teaching the EFL or ESL learners, this process can be applied in the same way to teach prepositions.

The Prototype Theory

In a category, a prototype is the typical, ideal or a good example which represents the whole class because of being better than the other members of the category. For example when we think about the bird category we find out that ‘ostrich’ is a bad example of a bird whereas ‘robin’ is a good one or prototypical one. Roach (1973) has come with the fundamentals of the prototype theory.

Lindstromberg (1996) asserts regarding preposition, the prototypical meaning is to have contact with an upper surface.
According to this theory, prepositions have multiple meanings, which are prototypical or most dominant among the particular category of meaning. The spatial, physical meanings of prepositions are considered to be the prototype. For instance the preposition ‘on’ has multiple meanings but when it reflects the meaning as "contact of an object with a line of surface" then it is the prototypical one Lindstromberg (1996).

Geeraerts (1989) claims “the fuzzy boundaries of lexical categories, the existence of typicality scales for the members of a category, the flexible and dynamic nature of word meanings, the importance of metaphor and metonymy as the basis of that flexibility...” (p. 590). It seems that the polysemous properties of grammatical elements like prepositions can be explained through the application of such knowledge. In the Prototype Approach, words are taught with extended explanations and they are based on semantic manner.

This approach is used and considered for the teaching and learning of prepositions and it helps the learners to learn deeply and increase the confidence (Lakoff 1987, Lindstromberg 1996, Lam 2009). To adopt this approach, first the language teacher must teach the features regarding prototypical meaning. Then they can proceed towards more abstract meanings and uses of the prepositions and only then the learners will be able to learn (Lindstromberg, 1996; Lam, 2009). According to Lam (2009) prototype 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” (p. 4).
Chavarría (2002) served a list consisting the best and worst prototypical concepts of the locative prepositions of English, such as ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘at’, as spatial and temporal. Brugman (1988) and Hawkins (1984) used concepts like prototypical sense and meaning chain to investigate the spatial prepositions and succeeded to reveal motivation.

**The Metaphors Theory**

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), our thought not only is the product of intellect, but also is governed by concepts. The daily functions, structure of our perception, the influence of people’s actions, and the relationships in between us are governed by these concepts. The everyday life is defined through this conceptual system as it plays a fundamental role.

Cognitive theory of metaphors tells us that metaphors are found in languages but they help us in shaping our mind and the mind is the source where they are created. According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002), the process of metaphorical thinking works in cognition which shows dynamic principles.
and uniform structures. A somewhat similar opinion is given by Ferrando (1999):

That conceptualization based on linguistic input plus bodily and social experience provides a source domain for metaphorical mappings onto other domains....Thus evidence is shown that idioms and collocations where *on* appears are semantically motivated by metaphorical mappings whose source domain is conceptual schema (support) that emerges as a combination of three domains: topology (contact), function (control), and force-dynamic interaction (downwards force on a vertical axis) (p.193).

Maslo (2011) claims, “However, the further we drift away from the basic (physical meaning, as we have claimed), where the prepositions match with their image schemas, the more difficulties we have in translation. The reason for this discrepancy is metaphorical language in prepositions” (p.93).

According to Lindstromberg (2010), when learners try to produce physical description, they use the exact sense of space in the use of spatial prepositions. On the contrary, to produce metaphorical meaning they use something else. Requejo and Diaz (2008) explain that more than one abstract metaphorical senses can be the outcome of one spatial meaning.

When prepositions are taught in the classroom most of time the literal meaning is considered which we can get from the structures of prepositions but it would be beneficial if the metaphorical references are used in the explanations. For example the preposition *through* can be used to express metaphorical meanings like being finished or out of an experience or a relationship. For example:

- Success comes *through* hard work.
- He went *through* a very frustrating time last year.

Similarly, *out* can be used with many metaphorical backgrounds. For example:
Let them decide it **out** among themselves. (Here, *out* means and extended period of time rather than a small period of time).

- He was drinking the whole time and now he is **out**. (Not here).
- She is playing **out** of her skin today. (Doing something better than ever).

Especially while dealing with spatial prepositions in the classroom the explanation of their metaphorical meanings are very important in order to understand them well. According to Clark (1973) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), if time metaphor is considered, it is taken as a path in an actual physical space. According to Wierzbicka (1993), there are two metaphorical options for the temporal use of *on*, which is used with time with the understanding of extension of space and their duration. For example:
- She will be back on Thursday (period of time) and
- On Thursday morning there was no one there (duration of time).

**Image Schema**

Langacker (2008) says that, in Cognitive Linguistics perspective, the notion of concept is equivalent to the notion of schema. A schema is a process of dealing with ideas formed by repeated patterns in our experience from our memory. It structures our cognition. Furthermore Johnson (1987) mentions that these patterns keep information about everything which is related to our daily experiences.

Image schemas may be – a. Static (motionless) and b. Dynamic (moving). There are three elements in Dynamic image schemas. They are-
1) A trajector (TR), (a definite demonstration of the idea of "figure", which moves along),
2) A path, (along which a trajector moves) and
3) A landmark (LM), a specific demonstration of the idea of "ground," and it is less prominent than the trajector.

According to Evans (2007), the containment image schema has interior, boundary and exterior as its structural elements. And the containment image schema is associated with prepositions such as empty, in, out, full, etc. Containment image schema for the preposition in can be presented in the following ways:

![Figure 3: Containment schema for in. Adapted from Language and spatial cognition, by A. Herskovits, 1986, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.](image)

The highly polysemic characters of prepositions can be understood by studying this approach as image schemas have strong bonding with the polysemous features of prepositions. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) introduce the central schema of meaning regarding the prototypical characteristics of prepositions.
Mental Lexicon

The mental lexicon is an association of words, which is a complex structure as they are linked to each other through many dimensions. It has a combination of phonology, syntax, semantics and other non-linguistic aspects of those words. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002) the mental lexicon is the mental store of a person which has words and the meaning associated with those words. It is like a thesaurus, a dictionary, an encyclopedia, a library, etc. To represent a full-listing mental lexicon will take the set of all word types in the corpus (Butterworth, 1983).

With the arrival of Cognitive Approach, now it is possible to identify the mental process that is inbuilt in the second language acquisition. It has recently been popular in the learning of a second language as it deals with the conceptualization of different sets of vocabulary. According to the function of our cognitive system, this approach also implements more systematic and useful strategies for teaching and learning a second or foreign language.
If the orthography, phonological features and the semantic meaning of a word is individually represented, the lexical entry creates a mental abstraction (Frost, 1998).

There are two mental lexicons existing in a second language learner: a) first language mental lexicon and b) second language mental lexicon (Bastkowski, 2010). According to Singleton (1999), in the communication process, the second language mental lexicon and first language mental lexicon are closely connected though they are stored separately. Wolter (2006) indicates that the L2 mental lexicon is strongly influenced by L1 mental lexicon. Moreover Bastkowski (2010) verifies that, the concept of a ‘clean’ L2 mental lexicon is not probable because the second language learner may not know a definite word in the target language. But the learner already has a mental concept in the mind.

For example, if we think about the prepositions between and among, then we will find that in Bangla there is only one post position for them and that is moddhe (in the middle of). So, the learners who have Bangla as their L1 do not have a different conceptual background for between and among. But gradually they will know that there are differences between them and will explore them as new lexical items by restructuring the semantic idea behind them. They will understand the meaning of between first and then they will understand the meaning of among in association with between. At the end of the process they will have two new lexical items in their mental lexicon.

A word is not only a word, it also works as a trigger for other linguistic and paralinguistic elements. According to Segui and Grainger (1990) a word activates the orthographic connection with it and Grainger, O’regan, Jacobs, and Segui (1989) claim that interference was found while dealing with orthographically similar words. Meyer and Schevaneldt (1971)
proposed that words have certain association with the semantic properties or meaning. Adding to that Sereno (1991) claims “Many theories recognize an early, automatic component that operates one word at a time in a rather context-insensitive manner, and several later processes that are sensitive to syntactic and semantic context” (p.19).

Wolter (2006) states that "What this means for the second language learner is that a complex set of assumptions for assimilating and structuring L₂ lexical knowledge is already well in place before they learn their first word in the second language” (p. 742). Teaching the prepositions will be easier through explaining the association among them as lexical items and semantic differences.

5. Conclusion

All these methods and approaches have played an important role in the implications for ESL pedagogy of prepositions. From the above mentioned theories and approaches, it seems that, following the traditional manner for teaching English prepositions is insufficient. It is very important for the teachers to know the various ways of teaching the prepositions. Because, from the discussion earlier there is no doubt that the clear conception is essential to use the prepositions appropriately. It will not be wise to limit teaching by following one particular strategy. And so, it seems that a combination of various cognitive methods will be able to create an ideal learning and teaching process of the prepositions for the EFL or ESL learners.
References


