

## TYPICAL DIFFICULTIES WITH ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS FOR SERBIAN LEARNERS

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this paper is to raise the awareness of typical difficulties Serbian learners have with prepositions in English and to recommend possible methodological solutions. The research was done on the first year students of Faculty of Pharmacy at the European University. Students were mixed-level learners of English whose native language is Serbian. At the beginning, causes of difficulties with prepositions were analyzed. As a research method students were tested and grammatical approach was used in error correction. Furthermore, students' common errors were discussed. In most cases, errors occurred due to the inter-lingual transfer. Based on this data and the author's extensive teaching experience, areas of common difficulties were determined. At the end, effective teaching techniques and activities were proposed to help students improve in these areas.

**KEY WORDS:** *prepositions, errors, difficulties, ESL, Serbian, syntactic, semantic, teaching techniques, grammatic.*

### 1. Introduction

According to the current studies on the methodology of the English language, teachers should understand students' needs, learning styles and effective traits (Richards, Renandya, 2002). Finding an adequate approach to teaching grammar has always been a challenge for many English teachers. Also, lexical items or words are sometimes mistakenly considered not to be a part of grammar. However, students acquire words through grammar rules. As teachers we should be able to explain the grammatical class of words, which word form should be used in a particular context, which words can combine

and what the correct word order looks like (Parrot, 2000). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to give an insight into typical learners' difficulties with the grammatical class of prepositions. Typology "provides the necessary basis for teasing the language-specific features apart from the universally shared ones." (Filipović, Vidaković, 2010: 269). This research mostly focuses on the causes and areas of difficulties Serbian learners have with prepositions. It also suggests teaching techniques and activities that can help learners overcome these difficulties.

## 2. Causes of difficulties with prepositions

Using prepositions is challenging not only for the Serbian speakers but also for other ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers. "Preposition usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar to master." (Chodorow et al., 2007: 25). One of the most likely reasons is the very nature of preposition. Prepositions are usually mono-morphemic words which belong to the closed class of lexical items i.e. items that can not be derived from other words. Prepositions are also non-inflecting which means that they do not have different forms (e.g. case and gender) like verbs or nouns for instance.

ESL learners usually have difficulties with prepositions because there are not so many prepositions in English as in other languages and students try to make an unnecessary distinction. Also, many usages are not related to the original meaning of that preposition and it can be confusing as learners are often led by the word meaning (Parrott, 2000). For instance, some prepositions are polysemous words which are not closely related. (e.g. *She was running on the path by (near) the river/ It will be done by (before) Saturday*).

The most common cause of difficulties is that many prepositions perform a number of complex syntactic roles. Unlike other words, prepositions have several syntactic functions and this can also be demanding for learners. In prepositional phrases, prepositions can govern a noun or a verb (e.g. *at home, at listening*), follow a verb (e.g. *depend on*), follow a noun (e.g. *interest in*) or an adjective (e.g. *keen on*), surround a complement (e.g. *from now on*) or be in the middle of two words (e.g. *word for word*). What can also be confusing is that prepositions can sometimes be short words (e.g. *on, in, at*), long words or phrases (e.g. *according to, despite, in terms of*) or even participles (e.g. *regarding, concerning*) (ibid, 2000).

On the other hand, difficulties occur because prepositions perform complex semantic roles. It is not rare in English to have prepositions with similar meanings (e.g. *in, inside, into*) whereas a learner's native language might not

have so many prepositions with similar meanings (e.g. in Serbian *in* and *into* is the same preposition *u*). Moreover, certain verbs, nouns and adjectives that have similar meaning use different prepositions (e.g. *fond of/ keen on*). What also causes difficulty is that the same verbs in a learner's native language and in English sometimes require different prepositions (e.g. in English, *thank you for the present*; in Serbian, *hvala ti na poklonu*). In English, ESL learners may find confusing the fact that some verbs require prepositions and their synonyms do not (e.g. *talk about/ discuss*). Also, different parts of speech of the same word sometimes use different preposition (e.g. *dependent on, dependence from*). Finally, there are prepositions which are combined with other words to express different meaning (e.g. in phrasal verbs).

Other causes of difficulties are different usages of prepositions in formal and informal language. For instance, certain prepositions are only used in formal or academic context (e.g. *notwithstanding*). Furthermore, geographical and social background influences the usage of prepositions. For example, in Australia preposition *on* is used with the noun *the weekend* whereas in Britain *at* is used with the noun *the weekend*. In Britain, working class would use the expression *go up town* whereas middle class uses the expression *go into town* (ibid, 2000).

Serbian learners often find it difficult to understand how a preposition can be placed at the end of the sentence away from its object (e.g. *Which rules do you have difficulty with?*) This is due to a syntactic construction called prepositional stranding. Prepositional stranding or placing a preposition away from its object is very common in English. Furthermore, Serbian learners often mix prepositions with adverbs or conjunctions. Several prepositions can function as prepositions and adverbs (e.g. *She was walking along the lake / They passed it along*). Also, some words can be both prepositions and conjunctions (e.g. *She came after lunch/ After they got home, she called*).

### 3. Method and Procedure

The subjects of this research were fifty two students who are in the first year of Faculty of Pharmacy at the European University. These students followed one semester course called English in Pharmacy where they studied English grammar as part of the course. Serbian is the native language for all of the students. Some of the examined students were at pre-intermediate level, some at intermediate and some at upper-intermediate level of English. It contributed to the variety of mistakes and influenced the results.

At the beginning, in order to clarify the students' typical difficulties with

prepositions, they were given tests and according to the percentage of their common errors conclusions were drawn. Errors were approached from a grammatical standpoint. The study of learners' errors can serve as a useful tool when a specific research question is investigated (Ellis, 1994). Nonetheless, some applied linguists posit that error correction can be harmful since it raises the students' level of anxiety and prevents the learner from acquiring communicative ability (Schulz, 1998: 49-58). Although error correction should be rarely applied in language teaching, it was beneficial for this research.

In this research, the tests consisted of cloze-in-the-gap exercises. Multiple choice questions are commonly used in education applications (Lee, Seneff, 2007: 2173-2176). One type used in this research, especially popular in language learning and assessment, is cloze-in-the-gap sentences or cloze items. In the first exercise of cloze items, one word was extracted from each sentence, and a number of words were offered to students for filling in the gap. An example is shown in Figure 1.

Chose one word from A to D and fill in the missing gaps:  
When I travel I prefer trains.....buses.  
on B) to C) from D)than

*Figure 1*

Another exercise used in this research is shown in Figure 2. A word was extracted from each sentence and students were asked to complete the sentences, if necessary, with up to two words which were not given as in the first exercise.

Fill in the gaps with the preposition if necessary. You may use up to two prepositions. Write dash if a preposition is not required.  
You can visit me .....Saturday afternoon.

*Figure 2*

When students completed the tests, they were assessed and errors were analyzed according to two criteria. The first criterion was the usage of preposition (e.g. substitution, omission or addition). The second criterion was according to the type of error (e.g. spatial preposition, dependant preposition and etc.)

According to the first criterion, errors were categorized in the following order:

1. Students used the wrong preposition (WP)
2. Students missed preposition (MP)
3. Students used an unnecessary preposition (UNP)

The percentage of each type of errors was calculated in relation to the total number of all errors.

In the second criterion, errors were classified according to the semantic relationship prepositions established with other words:

1. Students who made errors with spatial prepositions (PS)
2. Students who made errors with temporal prepositions (PT)
3. Students who made errors with dependent prepositions (PD)
4. Students who made errors with prepositions combined in phrases, mostly in idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs (PPH)
5. Students who made errors with prepositions in logical relationship (PL)

The percentage of each type of errors was calculated in relation to the total number of all errors.

Finally, results showed that there are certain areas in which Serbian learners have more difficulties. This implied that teachers should pay greater attention to these areas while teaching. Moreover, typical single errors performed by Serbian students were analyzed. Methods and activities that teachers can use in their practice to help learners improve their knowledge of prepositions were recommended.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Mistakes	Percentage
WP	53%
MP	38%
UNP	9%

*Figure 3*

As shown in Figure 3, most students used the wrong preposition (e.g. *\*When I travel I prefer trains from buses; \*The novel was written from Virginia*

*Woolf*, \*He got married with her). Serbian learners often make these errors in their spoken as well as in their written English. The problem is that the verbs, nouns and expressions used in these exercises usually require different prepositions in Serbian.

A number of students completely omitted the preposition (e.g. \*I am looking you; \*I like listening music). The omission both of the preposition *at* after the verb *look* and the preposition *to* after the verb *listen* is common among Serbian learners. The reason for this is that there are no prepositions in Serbian after the verbs *look* and *listen* in the same context (e.g. *Gledam te*; *Volim da slušam muziku*).

Unnecessary usage of prepositions was the least common and was primarily made by learners at lower levels of English (e.g. \* They discussed about it at the meeting). Serbian learners sometimes tend to use prepositions where they are not necessary. Again, this is because of the difference between the two languages (in Serbian the sentence above is constructed: *Razgovarali su o tome na sastanku*).

Mistakes	Percentage
PS	19%
PT	11%
PD	29%
PPH	36%
PL	5%

Figure 4

As presented in Figure 4, students made most of errors with idiomatic expressions (e.g. \*I am at good terms with my boss) and phrasal verbs (e.g. \*The judge needs to bring out the verdict). This field of English grammar is especially hard for native Serbian speakers, partially because Serbian does not have phrasal verbs and partially because one can not study idiomatic expressions using grammar rules. The Serbian language has idiomatic expressions but they are not the same as in English, in fact they are semantically and syntactically constructed in a completely different way (e.g. the sentence *I am on good terms with my boss* is said in Serbian *Slazem se dobro sa svojim šefom* /*U dobrim sam odnosima sa šefom*.)

Another case where many errors were found was a dependent preposition (e.g. \*interested for, \*depend of). The reason for this is because the same verbs in Serbian and English take different preposition as a complement (e.g.

in Serbian: *zainteresovan za, zavisian od*). Moreover, some verbs in Serbian do not have a dependent preposition whereas semantically the same English verbs have (e.g. *Slušam muziku/ I listen to music*).

Spatial prepositions are often difficult for Serbian learners. It is hard for them to distinguish the difference between prepositions *at* and *in* since they are mostly translated as one preposition *u* into Serbian (e.g. *\*in home; \*at the room*). In Serbian, fewer prepositions are used in different contexts than in English.

Temporal prepositions appeared less difficult for students. It was mostly students at lower levels that made errors with temporal prepositions. For instance, there are no prepositions in front of the dates in Serbian unlike in English. (e.g. *\*She was born August 14<sup>th</sup>/Rođena je četrnaestog avgusta*). Students confused prepositions *at* and *in* but this time as temporal prepositions. (e.g. *\*in 5 p.m., \*at June*).

The smallest number of students used the wrong preposition in logical relationships (e.g. *\*I left despite his speech*). The reason for this is because Serbian uses semantically similar prepositions in the same logical relationships (e.g. *Otišao sam zbog njegovog govora / I left due to his speech*).

To conclude, most of the errors occurred because of the difference between English and Serbian. Students tend to use the same patterns, even inaccurate ones, from Serbian in English. In linguistics, this is called an inter-lingual transfer and is common to ESL learners.

## 5. Advisable techniques and activities for teaching prepositions

The most successful method of learning prepositions is simply the exposure to examples. This is because prepositions are difficult to translate from any language to the target language. Their usage also depends on the context. The audio-lingual technique has proven not to be helpful in this case. Native speakers pronounce prepositions quickly and vowels often disappear in pronunciation. Therefore listening to spoken English is not necessarily effective. However, visual aids can contribute to learning process. Students memorize better when they are visually exposed to something. Computer-based activities can be introduced in this case and video displays can be included. In this way, students can be visually exposed to prepositions; they can do activities and receive feedback at the same time.

One method that was proven to be effective is a regular usage of dictionaries. Students should be encouraged to use dictionaries whenever they are not sure which word goes with which preposition. This can be especially useful

for dependent prepositions as it can increase their correct usage. In the case of prepositions in idiomatic expressions, exposure to examples is crucial as well. This is because it is often not clear which preposition is appropriate. Different languages and regional dialects often have different conventions.

In order to improve the usage of spatial and temporal prepositions, students can correct themselves in pairs. Students can be given cloze item activities and after completing them individually they can correct each others' errors. Current studies show that pair work provides good results. Unlike old-fashioned error correction techniques, error correction in pairs is a more communicative method. Students memorize their mistakes better in pairs and tend not to make them again. Students can also be given a task to write a letter and then to work in pairs and find errors with prepositions in each other's letters.

Another advisable method in teaching is to contextualize prepositions. For example, the following activity can be given to students:

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Obviously I would have to think over my plans for the day. From my bedroom window I looked down at my snow-covered car. That was my last hope. After breakfast I managed to brush off all the snow from the car and by a good stroke of fortune I managed to get it started at the third attempt. I drove along the road that led up to the motorway with a light heart because everything seemed to be going well. It was almost fun with the sun shining through the clouds and the snow gently falling down on to the car. But that feeling did not last long. As I reached the slip road that joined the motorway I saw an enormous queue of cars one behind the other. I realized I was stuck right in the middle of a huge traffic jam. In my mind I started to go through the qualities that were needed for the job. Among the requirements were: ability to work under pressure, calmness in the face of difficult circumstances and a determination to see a job through to the end. I reviewed the situation. It was 9 am by now and on a normal day the drive would take about forty-five minutes. On a day like this it would be impossible to gauge. I decided to relax. After all nobody else could travel so why should I worry about it? Within five minutes the traffic was moving again and for the next two miles I was driving along the motorway at quite a good speed.

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*Figure 5*

Read the text in Figure 5 and answer the following questions:

1. Identify all the prepositions in this text
2. Which prepositions are a part of idiomatic expressions?
3. Which prepositions are dependent prepositions?

4. How many meanings can these dependent prepositions have?
5. Identify any words that are not prepositions in this text but can be prepositions in other contexts.

This activity will raise the awareness of prepositions in written English and students will learn prepositions within context. Students will be able to see examples in a real life situation and they will memorize prepositions as used in context.

Another activity that can be used is giving students sentences with words that can all function as prepositions. Their task is to determine what the word class of these words is in each sentence:

1. She ran *down* the hill.
2. He walked *off*.
3. She's determined *to* taking part.
4. He made *up* the news.
5. He set *on* the chair.
6. He stepped *off* the stairs (ibid, 2000).

This activity will help students understand syntactic functions of prepositions better and also help them use these prepositions correctly in the same as well as in a similar sentence.

In this research, there were groups of students who were at three different levels of English: pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate. The best method for this mixed-level group of students is to give them activities at intermediate level. These activities might be challenging for students at pre-intermediate level but the level of motivation will be higher. Upper-intermediate students might find them easy but they will revise their knowledge which can also be useful.

## 6. Conclusion

Prepositions have always been a challenge to ESL learners. Only at higher levels, such as advanced or proficiency level, the transfer can take place. Transfer may be a developmental phenomenon in that it occurs only when the learner reaches a 'natural' stage of acquisition which bears a crucial similarity to some native structure (Ellis, 1994). ESL teachers also find it challenging to teach them. Taking all this into account, this paper identified areas of prepositions which Serbian learners had difficulty with and proposed effective methods for teaching prepositions. Nevertheless, this research did not cover

all errors that Serbian learners make concerning prepositions. It also did not demonstrate all of the methods that are advisable for teaching them. Future studies should address this topic in more detail as it is obviously the most difficult field of grammar for ESL learners. Future studies could also address how computers, computer-based activities and the Internet can help learners with prepositions.

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## TIPIČNE NEDOUMICE IZVORNIH GOVORNIKA SRPSKOG JEZIKA PRILIKOM UPOTREBE PREDLOGA U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

REZIME: Cilj ovog rada je da ukaže na to koje su tipične nedoumice prilikom upotrebe predloga na engleskom jeziku kod izvornih govornika srpskog jezika i da ponudi nastavne metode kao rešenje. Istraživanje je rađeno na studentima prve godine Farmaceutskog fakulteta na Evropskom univerzitetu. Studenti su na različitim nivoima znanja engleskog jezika i svim studentima je srpski jezik maternji. Na početku rada analizirani su uzroci ovih nedoumica. Metod istraživanja podrazumevao je testiranje studenata i analizu tipičnih grešaka uz gramatički pristup. U većini slučajeva do grešaka je došlo usled međujezičkog transfera. Na osnovu podataka prikazanih u ovom radu i dugogodišnjeg iskustva autorke u nastavi, utvrđeni su slučajevi u kojima studenti najčešće imaju nedoumice u korišćenju predloga. Da bi studentima bilo olakšano savladavanje ove materije predložene su delotvorne nastavne metode i vežbe na kraju rada.

KLJUČNE REČI: *predlozi, greške, nedoumice, ESL, srpski jezik, sintaktički, semantički, nastavne metode, gramatički.*