

Acquisition of English Prepositions in Writing by ESL Learners

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English prepositions are difficult for ESL (English as a second language) learners mainly for two reasons: (1) The cross linguistic variations between L1 and L2 (first language and second language). (2) The polysemy of English prepositions where they are used to denote a wide range of meanings in different perspectives. Littlefield (2006) has investigated four categories of prepositions through the analysis of naturalistic speech of five English speaking first language children (aged 1;2-2;3) as follows: Adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], Particles [-Lexical,-Functional], Semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional], Functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional]. Littlefield also has shown that the acquisition of categories of prepositions with [-Functional] features rank higher than the categories of prepositions with [+Functional] features. She considered as [+Lexical] those that contribute semantic content, and as [+Functional] those that are able to check Case of their complements. The present study sets to examine the acquisition of prepositions by Sinhala speaking learners of English with respect to Littlefield (2006) findings. It investigates whether the same ranking in acquisition of the four categories of prepositions can be validated by the Sinhala speaking ESL learners' responses in a writing task. A picture story writing task in which the prepositions needed to be abundantly used was utilized in order to collect elicited production data from 40 students of Grade 4 who were randomly selected from two government schools. Quantitative statistical analysis using SPSS was used to find out whether there were significant differences between the acquisition of each set of two different categories out of these four categories of prepositions. If prepositions with [-Functional / +Lexical] feature rank higher than the prepositions with [+Functional /-Lexical] feature respectively, relevant order can be used as a guideline in the ESL class-room to facilitate teaching of prepositions through writing tasks.

Keywords: ESL, Adverbial Prepositions, Particles, Semi-lexical Prepositions, Functional Prepositions, Writing Tasks