

**A comparative study on the acquisition of the four categories of prepositions in writing by the ESL learners in Sri Lanka: Grade 8 and Grade 10**

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*Presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Asia TEFL International Conference: Creating the future for ELT in Asia: Opportunities and Directions, International Youth Cultural Centre, Nanjing, China*

The present study attempts to validate or disprove the fine-grained categorization of English prepositions found by Littlefield (2006), on the basis of ESL (English as a Second Language) learners' acquisition patterns in a writing task. In English, prepositions are words while in Sinhala, they are represented as spatial postpositions or as suffixes (Thilakaratne 1992). This particular cross-linguistic variation as well as the polysemy and the idiosyncrasy of some English prepositions make a negative impact on the acquisition of English prepositions to the ESL learners whose first language is Sinhala. Littlefield (2006) found the existence of four categories of English prepositions as follows: Adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], Particles [-Lexical, -Functional], Semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional], and Functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional]. Using naturalistic speech data of five native speakers, Littlefield (2006) has found that the prepositions with [-Functional] categories show an advantage over the prepositions with [+Functional] categories in the acquisition of English prepositions. Here, [+Lexical] featured prepositions are those that contribute semantic content and prepositions with [+Functional] assign Case to their complements. This study examines the frequency as well as the accuracy of production of the four categories of prepositions in writing. It aims to compare the acquisition patterns of prepositions of ESL learners in writing. A picture story writing task in which prepositions needed to be abundantly used was utilized to collect production data from 40 randomly selected students each from Grade 8 and Grade 10 in two schools. Interaction effects and category wise analysis were computed and a two way ANNOVA was run by using SPSS. If the prepositions with [-Functional] rank higher than the prepositions with [+ Functional] features the relevant order can be used to facilitate the teaching of English prepositions and also to prepare the study guides and text books for the relevant Grades in schools.

**Keywords:** ESL, Adverbial prepositions, Particles, Semi-lexical prepositions, Functional prepositions, Writing tasks