

## Acquisition of locative and directional prepositions by ESL learners of Sri Lanka

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The aim of the study is to examine whether the ESL learners whose first language is Sinhala, acquire locative prepositions better than the directional prepositions initially, and this particular lexicalization difficulty in acquisition slowly disappears by the time the learners reach the tertiary level education. Space related language manifests itself in different ways. In English it appears as prepositions. Mastering the use of spatial prepositions is one of the challenging tasks that the English language learners face. Spatial prepositions are of two types:

(1) **Locative prepositions**, for example, *The candle*(figure) *is* on *the table*(ground)

(2) **Directional prepositions**, for example, *The horse*(figure) *jumped* over *the wall* (ground).

Locative and directional prepositions in English language occur before the *ground* of the spatial scene whereas in Sinhala language, postpositions are used instead. Stinger (2005) has shown that the directional prepositions (traversal paths) present a particular lexicalization difficulty in the early stages of acquisition of English, French and Japanese as the first language. A dictation task was administered to 185 students from two government schools and the performance of 20 students was analysed from each of the following grades: Grade 8, Grade 10, and Grade 12. A sentence battery consisting of 20 sentences of which 10 sentences each contained locative and directional prepositions was used. Students were asked to listen to the each sentence carefully and write it down. The elicited imitation method was used to collect data and quantitative statistical analysis was computed using SPSS to find out whether there is a significant difference between the accuracy of the locative and directional prepositions within and across the grades. As the outcome of this research, if one category of spatial prepositions shows an initial advantage over the other, the relevant order can be used as a guideline in the ESL class-room to facilitate the teaching of spatial prepositions in the relevant grades. If this particular acquisition difficulty disappears by Grade 12, both categories of spatial prepositions can be introduced at equal frequency at the tertiary level through dictation.

**Keywords:** ESL, Spatial prepositions, Locative prepositions, Directional prepositions, Elicited imitation.