

Acquisition of English Prepositions by ESL Learners in Sri Lanka: A Comparison between Grade 4 and Grade 6 of government schools

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Research and simple observation indicate that English prepositions are a problem for learners at every level of proficiency (Cowan, 2008). Littlefield (2006) has investigated the existence of four fine-grained categories of prepositions in the domain of prepositions by analyzing first language acquisition of five children (aged 1-2, 2-3) using naturalistic speech data as follows:

- (1) Adverbial prepositions [+ Lexical, -Functional],
- (2) Semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional],
- (3) Particles [-Lexical, - Functional],
- (4) Functional Prepositions [- Lexical, + Functional]

Littlefield considered as [+Lexical] those that contribute semantic content, and as [+Functional] those that are able to check the Case of their complements. The overall objective of the study was to validate the existence of these fine-grained categories of the domain of English prepositions by using ESL learners in Grade 4 (aged 9- 9:11) and Grade 6 (11- 11:11) of two government schools in Sri Lanka and to compare the order of acquisition of English prepositions in Grade 4 with Grade 6. A dictation task was administered to 65 students from each Grade in two schools. Ten sentences each with each category of preposition were recorded, played to the students and was requested to write them down. The findings were analyzed using SPSS.

The findings of the study validated by using Littlefield's 2006 study that there are four categories of prepositions in the domain of English prepositions. The results showed that in both grades there is a significant difference in the acquisition of adverbial prepositions with particles and functional prepositions. There is no significant difference between the other categories of prepositions in both grades. The findings also showed that the order of the acquisition of English prepositions in Grade 4 and Grade 6 were similar and the sentences with [+Lexical] prepositions are imitated better than the sentences with [-Lexical] categories.

The observations conclude that the existence of four fine-grained categories of preposition is validated by ESL learners of both Grade 4 and Grade 6. Both Grades showed the same order of

acquisition of English prepositions and it differs from the native speakers' order. The order of acquisition of English prepositions, found in this study is recommended to the teachers of English to use in the ESL classroom to facilitate teaching English prepositions in schools effectively.

Keywords: *Adverbial Prepositions, Dictation Task, Functional Prepositions, Particles, Semi-Lexical Preposition.*

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