



LEARNING TO USE ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS: STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TAMIL STUDENTS

*Jeyaseelan Gnanaseelan**

Department of English Language Teaching, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

The mastery of English prepositions poses a significant challenge for Tamil-speaking ESL students in Sri Lanka, attributable to profound morpho-syntactic structural differences between English and Tamil. English prepositions, functioning to establish syntactic and semantic relationships within sentences, contrasts starkly with Tamil's case system where grammatical relationships are integrated into the noun through suffixes. This study, conducted with 84 Sri Lankan university students, investigates these implications through a corpus analysis of texts produced in formal assessments, focusing on the usage of prepositions in the discourse of business letters. The research methodology combined structural and functional analysis to identify prepositional errors revealing patterns that emphasize the influence of the Tamil linguistic structure on English language acquisition. Notably, the over-reliance on certain prepositions, especially "in," for denoting place, time and manner, reflects a direct transfer from Tamil's case-ending equivalents. This tendency suggests a potential gap in understanding the complex requirements of English prepositional use leading to frequent misuse and overuse. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted difficulties with compound prepositions and phrasal verbs indicating a lack of familiarity with these constructs in English. The study extends beyond error analysis examining the cognitive, social and discourse dimensions. By applying theories such as Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and Piaget's Schema Theory, it explored how social interaction, environmental factors and cognitive structures influence the learning process. The findings revealed a significant pattern of errors related to incorrect replacement, omission and addition of prepositions, reflecting the complexities of the two different grammatical frameworks. This investigation's implications are manifold. For ESL educators and curriculum developers, the results emphasize the necessity of targeted instruction that specifically addresses the functional use of prepositions in English contrasting them with Tamil's post-positional markers and case suffixes. Such pedagogical approaches should incorporate visual aids, contextual learning, corpus analysis tools and personalized feedback. Peer learning, role-playing and the use of digital language learning tools can further support the acquisition processes. Ultimately, this study contributes to second language acquisition by illuminating the specific challenges faced by Tamil speakers.

Keywords: English prepositions, Tamil case system, ESL students, morpho-syntactic structural implications, language acquisition, pedagogical strategies

*Corresponding Author: jeya86@vau.ac.lk



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Department of English Language Teaching, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Mastering English prepositions among ESL students is a common challenge observed in language learning. Prepositions like "by," "of," "in," "on," and others are often sources of confusion because they can have many different meanings and uses depending on the context. In English, prepositions are often idiomatic, meaning, they do not always follow logical rules and can vary based on established usage patterns. Prepositions are crucial in establishing relationships between nouns, their equivalents and other words in a sentence. The comprehensive analysis of English prepositions and Tamil cases for Tamil-speaking ESL students offers insights into significant linguistic and educational challenges. This introduction captures the essence of the morpho-syntactic obstacles encountered in ESL learning environments.

The study begins by emphasising the crucial role of prepositions in English, which often serves as stumbling blocks for learners due to their idiomatic usage and critical syntactic functions (Bruce, 18; Dirven, 73-97). The research explicitly targets Tamil speakers' difficulties, whose native language structure—relying on case suffixes to denote relational functions—differs markedly from English prepositional usage (Schiffman, 1998).

The urgency of addressing these challenges is underlined by the increasing adoption of English as a medium of instruction in Sri Lanka, especially in higher education and professional contexts. The absence of a prepositional system in Tamil complicates the learning process for Tamil speakers, necessitating a focused study to develop effective pedagogical strategies that bridge these linguistic gaps (Pit Corder, 224-254; 256-294).

The fundamental differences between English and Tamil highlight how English prepositions form critical links within sentences, unlike Tamil's morphological approach through case endings (Chalker, 214; Stageberg, p. 169). The divergence of these linguistic systems, rooted in their respective Indo-European and Dravidian language families, presents unique challenges to Tamil speakers, such as the absence of direct equivalents for many English prepositions (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Kharm and Hajjaj, pp. 331-345).

The seminal works shed light on the complexity of English prepositions (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), the grammatical functionalities of the Tamil case system (Annamalai, 2000), and the syntactic disparities between the two languages (Rajendran, 2008). The review acknowledges the significant impact of L1 transfer errors and the benefits of explicit grammar instruction and technological integration in learning English prepositions (Ellis, 1994; James, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Gonzalez-Lloret, 2016).

Together, there is a need for a clear rationale for targeted instructional interventions that accommodate the specific linguistic needs of Tamil-speaking ESL students. By incorporating cognitive linguistics and error analysis, the study promotes teaching strategies that enhance conceptual understanding and practical application of English prepositions. This approach aims to improve grammatical accuracy and increase communicative competence in English, ensuring that learners can effectively manage academic and professional contexts.

Objectives

- 1) To identify and analyse the structural, textual and linguistic relations and errors related to the specified issues specifically focusing on the use of prepositions.
- 2) To uncover the potential implications of morpho-syntactic structures on the overall effectiveness and clarity of the students' communication in English.
- 3) To shed light on the challenges ESL students face in mastering the use of English prepositions, particularly in comparison to the morpho-syntactic structures of Tamil cases.



The analysis encompassed both structural and functional analyses aiming to identify any errors in the students' use of prepositions within the discourse of business letters. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the surface-level analysis and examines the psychological, social and discourse constructions and dimensions underlying the students' use of prepositions. By tracing these dimensions, the research aims to uncover the potential implications of morpho-syntactic structures on the overall effectiveness and clarity of the students' communication in English.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, utilising a textual analytical approach in applied linguistics. The analysis focuses on the specific tasks performed by the first-semester second-year students (the academic year 2017/2018) of the Faculty of Business Studies, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka, in formal written assessments in 2019. Notably, they were exposed to English Language proficiency courses of six non-GPA credit values for two semesters in their first year.

One task was as part of a Business English test, where the students were instructed to write a letter of complaint to the Ceylon Electricity Board branch manager in their respective districts regarding the issue of power cuts. That particular batch had 117 students. On the assessment day, only 84 students attended the assessment. Therefore, a corpus of texts from 84 students was collected from the examination providing an authentic dataset for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis focused on using prepositions within the discourse of a complaint letter regarding power cuts. The quantitative data indicated the percentage of students who used specific prepositions.

Table 01: The prepositions used within the discourse of a complaint letter

SN	Prepositions	Percentage of Students Using
Section: 01	“in”	75%-100%
Section: 02	“to”	51%-75%
Section: 03	"about" "for" and "over"	26%-50%
Section: 04	“as”, “at”, “because of”, "by", "due to", "from", "of", "on", "over", "regarding" "with" and "without"	11%-25%
Section: 05	"above", "according to", "after", "against", "around", "before", "during", "forward", "like" "near", "off", "out", "out of", "since" "still", "through" and "within"	<10%

The analysis revealed a particularly high usage of the preposition "in" (Section 01) with 75% to 100% of students employing it to denote various aspects such as place, time and manner. Examples provided include "in this area", "in the midnight" and "in a proper way." This overuse suggests a strong influence from the Tamil case system where similar grammatical functions are integrated into the noun thus possibly leading ESL students to default to "in" due to its broad applicability in English. Further, analysis showed varied usage of other prepositions with "to" (Section 02) being used by 51% to 75% of students to denote relationships, and the prepositions in Section 03 used by 26% to 50% of students. The preposition "over" notably appeared to be replicated directly from the question prompt indicating a possible lack of understanding in applying it creatively. Conversely, the prepositions in Section 04 were used by only 11% to 25% of the students. This suggests a challenge in using prepositions that have distinct and varied functional uses in English compared to Tamil.



The least utilized prepositions are included in Section 05. All were employed by less than 10% of the students. This highlights a significant difficulty in understanding and applying these prepositions in appropriate contexts.

In the example provided, the use of a prepositional phrase as a subject in English sentences, such as "In our area always has power cut; so we unable to plan our work," reflects a deviation from Standard English grammar where the subject is typically a noun or a pronoun. The students demonstrate the confusion between the use of prepositions and conjunctions in English, particularly with the words "because" and "because of." The double preposition errors in English highlights the misuse of prepositions in ways that are grammatically nonstandard. This misuse is categorized into two main types: consecutive usage of two prepositions where only one is needed and redundant preposition use within and at the end of a sentence. The analysis of malformation in prepositional phrases highlights issues that English learners, particularly those with a Tamil background, may encounter due to differences in language structures, specifically in how prepositional phrases and temporal expressions are formed. In this survey, approximately, 32% of students exhibit errors related to improper preposition use, indicating a significant challenge in adapting to English prepositional norms. The analysis reveals several instances where incorrect prepositions lead to unclear or grammatically incorrect sentences. The common errors due to the absence of prepositions in sentences are mistakes made by approximately 39% of the students surveyed in this study. Due to the dichotomic nature of positional variation of preposition and post-position and case suffixes, the Tamil learners fail to use prepositions for location, direction, time and agency. In examining the structural implications of English prepositions and Tamil cases on ESL (English as a Second Language) students, a significant pattern of errors has been identified, particularly in the *Unnecessary Prepositional Use* of prepositions. Approximately, 51% of the students exhibit this error type, as demonstrated through various sentences.

The findings emphasise that while some prepositions have direct equivalents in Tamil and are thus easier for students to grasp, others do not, posing substantial challenges in ESL learning environments. The consistent misuse of "in" and underuse of contextually complex prepositions indicate a need for targeted instructional strategies. These strategies should focus on the diverse functional uses of English prepositions, distinguishing them from Tamil grammatical structures.

The application of Piaget's Schema Theory helps elucidate how these students struggle to assimilate new linguistic structures (English prepositions) into their existing cognitive frameworks (knowledge of Tamil cases). Due to the profound linguistic disparities between English and Tamil, students often require substantial adjustments in their cognitive schemas to accommodate the new information effectively. This adjustment process explains the frequent errors in preposition usage as students attempt to assimilate English prepositional contexts that are incongruent with their native Tamil grammatical structures.

The study also integrates Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory highlighting the role of social interaction and environmental factors in learning English prepositions. The theory proposes that observational learning, role of social interaction, environmental influences, modeling and imitation, self-efficacy and motivation facilitate students to learn the use of prepositions by observing peers, teachers and other English speakers. In the context of the study, the frequent use of prepositions like "in", "to" and "about" suggests that students might replicate patterns they commonly see or hear, possibly influenced by the environment in which English is used. Peer learning, role-playing and the use of digital platforms can enhance the acquisition of prepositional knowledge. These interactive methods enable students to observe correct usage, practice in communicative settings and receive feedback, thus facilitating a more engaging and effective learning experience. Students' belief in their ability to learn and correctly use English prepositions affects their engagement and effort.

The findings confirm the frequent misuse, overuse and confusion of prepositions among Tamil-speaking students, attributing these issues to attempts at direct translation from Tamil, where equivalent grammatical structures often do not exist. For instance, the over-reliance on certain prepositions like "in", "to", "about" and "for" reflects their attempt to find direct equivalents in Tamil which may not always convey the same semantic or functional meanings in English.



The analysis reveals that these students often construct sentences that deviate from Standard English grammar, such as using prepositional phrases incorrectly as subjects or confusing prepositions with conjunctions. Such errors demonstrate the influence of Tamil's syntactic patterns on their English language use leading to constructions that are grammatically incorrect in English but may be structurally sound in Tamil.

Additionally, the study notes that while some prepositions are used excessively, others that require a serious understanding for correct application are often underused or misused. This disparity highlights the need for targeted grammatical instruction that addresses the specific challenges faced by Tamil speakers focusing on the syntactic and semantic properties of English prepositions.

It is advisable to have instructional approaches that explicitly teach the differences between Tamil and English grammatical structures. By doing so, educators can help students restructure their cognitive schemas more effectively and overcome the inherent challenges in learning English prepositions. This personalised instruction, combined with opportunities for social interaction and practice, can significantly improve Tamil speakers' proficiency in using English prepositions correctly and fluently.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings offer critical insights into their linguistic adaptation and learning challenges. The study highlights how structural elements of the Tamil language influence the acquisition and usage of English prepositions, presenting both facilitative and obstructive impacts on learning.

The investigation points out these learners' prevalent reliance on specific prepositions, largely driven by their attempts to map Tamil grammatical structures onto English. This reliance often leads to patterns of overuse and misuse of prepositions signalling deep-seated challenges in mastering English syntax due to the substantial morpho-syntactic differences between the two languages. Furthermore, the study reveals that many Sri Lankan university students struggle with correctly applying and recognising prepositions, often failing to comprehend their positioning and functional meanings in English sentences. This is exacerbated by educational materials and instructions that do not adequately address the functional meanings of prepositions leaving students confused about their correct usage in context.

Additionally, the paper discusses the broader educational implications, suggesting that by addressing these morpho-syntactic challenges directly, educators can better support Tamil-speaking students in achieving greater proficiency in English.

Key recommendations for improving ESL instruction include:

1. **Enhanced instructional strategies:** Develop targeted instructional strategies that bridge the conceptual and structural gaps between Tamil and English. This involves focusing on enhancing students' understanding and application of English prepositions in various contexts.
2. **Curriculum development:** Adjust curriculum designs to include more explicit explanations of prepositions' functional uses in reading and listening exercises within educational materials.
3. **Research and pedagogical tools development:** Further research into cross-linguistic influences on language learning and the development of pedagogical tools that cater specifically to the needs of Tamil-speaking ESL students.

In summary, the study underlines the complexity of language learning influenced by first language structures promoting tailored educational approaches that address specific linguistic challenges. By improving the understanding and teaching of English prepositions through explicit and comparative instruction, educators can significantly enhance the language proficiency of Tamil-speaking ESL students facilitating their smoother transition to English proficiency.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

N/A