



Prepositions and ESL Learners: the Malaysian Scenario

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the literature on prepositions with a focus on definitions and main difficulties faced by Malaysian students. It further highlights recommendations about the role of syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers in meeting these challenges. It is hoped that this article could provide a platform for any further studies on prepositions.

Keywords: English prepositions, Malaysian ESL learners, ESL textbooks

1. Introduction

A preposition is defined as a word or group of words (Kaplan, 1989; Tan, 1994; Hughes, 1992) and often has meanings which have something to do with location or direction and movement (Kaplan, 1989; Hughes, 1992) and time or method (Hughes, 1992). The majority of prepositions express relationship between things and events and their basic sense is spatial (Borjars and Burridge, 2001). A comprehensive description of prepositions in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1985, pp. 673-695) presents prepositional meanings in terms of place and time.

According to Quirk et al. (ibid.), the prepositional meaning of the chief prepositions of place is presented in a form of diagram. They are in a form of dimensional properties of point (dimension-type 0), line or surface (dimension-type 1/2) and area or volume (dimension type 2/3) between the notions of simple position and direction. The positive position (*at, in, on*), the positive direction (*to, on(to), in(to)*), the negative position (*away from, off, out of*) and the negative direction (*(away) from, off, out of*).

Quirk et al. (ibid.) furthermore explains, apart from simple position, prepositions may express the relative position of two objects or group of objects. For instance, *above, over, on top of, under, underneath, beneath, below, in front of, behind, beside, near (to), between and among*. These prepositions can also express relative destination but not generally for *above* and *below*.

As with verbs of motion, Quirk et al. (ibid.) describes prepositions for relative destination may express the idea of passage (that is, movement towards and then away from a place) as well as destination, even though there is an ambiguity in supplying the meaning of passage or the meaning of destination. In a sentence 'The ball rolled *underneath* the table', the meaning of passage is the ball passed *under* the table on the way to some other destination. The meaning of destination is the ball rolled *under* the table and stayed there. Also with verbs of motion, a group of prepositions may express direction or movement, for instance, *up, down, along, across* and *(a)round*.

Also, many place prepositions have abstract meanings which are clearly related, through metaphorical connection, to their locative uses as shown below:

- i. *in* shallow water (purely literal)
- ii. *in* deep water (also metaphorical = 'in trouble')
- iii. *in* difficulties (the preposition is used metaphorically)
- iv. *in* a spot (= 'in a difficult situation')

Quirk et al. (ibid.) further describes the prepositional meanings of time in terms of time position, measurement into the future and duration. The prepositions that are used to indicate time include *at, on, in, for, before, after, since, until, till, between, by* and *up to*.

While Lindstromberg (1997, p. 15) argues that the traditional division of prepositions into place, direction and time are particularly fuzzy. He then presents his basics about prepositions by using the terms Subject and Landmark and explains the use of prepositions to express a relationship between a Subject and a Landmark. For example, some prepositions say where something is in physical relation to another thing such as 'There was a candle *on* the table'. In this sentence, a candle is the 'Subject' of the preposition, the table is the 'Landmark' of the preposition. The preposition tells us where the Subject is in relation to the Landmark. In the example, *on* is a 'preposition of place'. Also, because both the Subject and the Landmark are tangible things, we can say that *on* is being used literally. Lindstromberg (ibid.) also uses Subjects and Landmarks for prepositions of time and prepositions of path for prepositions of direction, movement or motion.

On the other hand, Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 409) display in chart form the various meanings of common prepositions. These common prepositions even though are in the spatial domain, they also represent their meanings in terms of time, degree and others. *At, about, above, against, around, before, below, between, by, for, from, in, of, on, over, through, to, toward(s), under* and *with* are all categorized as space but being described with their extended meanings. These prepositions have also been categorized as time (except for the prepositions *above* and *below*), degree (except for *before, in* and *through*) and others which include idiomatic usages (except for *around, before* and *below*).

Even though the prepositional meanings have been looked into various aspects, overall they are firstly discussed in the interest of space, place or location before their meanings are extended to time, direction and others.

Apart from the description of definitions of prepositions in terms of meanings, the definition also appears in relation to its form. Pullum and Huddleston (2002) inform the traditional definition of a preposition is 'a word that governs, and normally precedes, a noun or pronoun and which expresses the latter's relation to another word' (p. 598). However, Pullum and Huddleston (ibid.) have substituted the traditional 'noun or pronoun' with 'noun phrase'. With that modification, the traditional definition can be illustrated in the following example:

- i. Max sent a photograph *of* his new house *to* his parents.

In (i), the preposition *of* relates the Noun Phrase (his new house) to the noun (photograph), while *to* relates the Noun Phrase (his parents) to the verb send.

- ii. They are both very keen *on* golf.

Similarly in (ii), *on* relates the Noun Phrase golf to the adjective keen.

The complexity of the form of preposition is also observed in the phrase structure rule for a prepositional phrase as suggested by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). By doing this, "several observations can be made about the form of prepositions (PrepP → Prep NP)" (p. 402). In line with Carter and Carthy (2006, p. 916), 'a phrase with a preposition as the head followed by a complement is called a prepositional phrase (I'll come *with* you)', earlier descriptions of a prepositional phrase according to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 657) consists of a preposition followed by a prepositional complement which is characteristically a noun phrase or a wh-clause or V-ing clause:

Preposition	Prepositional complement
<i>at</i>	the bus-stop
<i>from</i>	what he said
<i>by</i>	signing a peace treaty

The description is further extended to the syntactic functions of prepositional phrases as complementation of a verb (We depend *on* you) and complementation of an adjective (I am sorry *for* his parents). The preposition *on* and *for* is closely related to and is determined by the preceding verb: depend and the preceding adjective: sorry)

In addition to this, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 402) describe the form of prepositions as the co-occurrence of prepositions with verbs and adjectives:

Verb + Prep

to rely *on*
to detract *from*
to consist *of*
to substitute *for*
to part *with*

Adj + Prep

to be dependent *on*
to be free *from/of*
to be afraid *of*
to be sorry *for*
to be content *with*

In the case of the co-occurrence with nouns, it has been described in terms of noun phrases which are preceded or followed by a preposition such as *in* my opinion, *to* my mind, *from* my point of view, objection *to*, awareness *of*, belief *in*. Sometimes, noun phrases are both preceded and followed by prepositions to form multiword clusters, such as *with* respect *to*, *at* odds *with*, *in* return *for*.

Biber et al. (1999, p. 103) further provides the structure of a complex prepositional phrase (NP = noun phrase, Prep = preposition, PP = prepositional phrase):

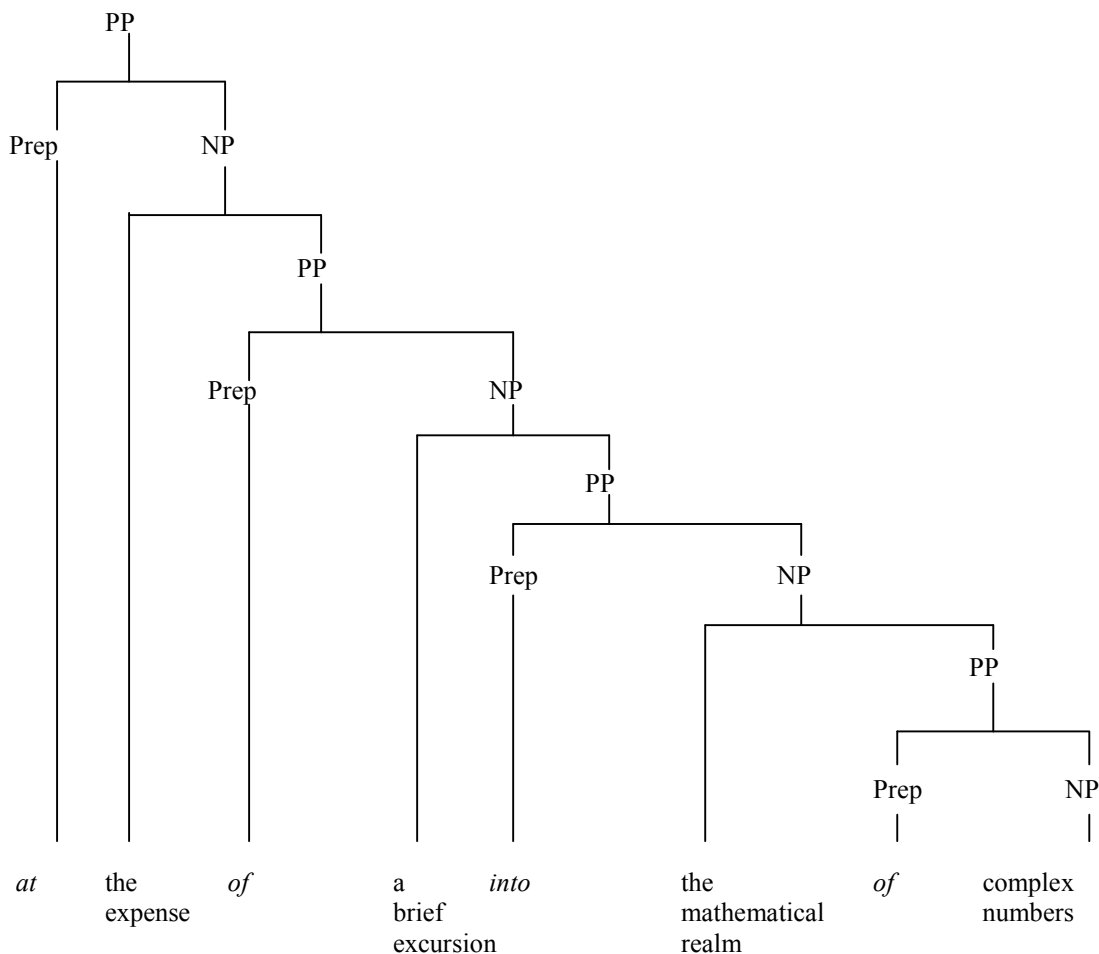


Figure 1. The structure of a complex prepositional phrase

However, Tan (2002) illustrated her studies on the forms of prepositions in terms of a particular type of fixed expressions called prepositional clusters which are commonly found in everyday informal communication (written and spoken). She looked closely at 'round about' (preposition + preposition). On close analysis, it was found that as a cluster, 'round about' occurs mainly in adverbial position indicating place (orientation, direction) and time (when), whereas its components *round* and *about* could occur as either prepositions or adverbs.

Hoffman (2004) studied low-frequency complex prepositions on the basis that these prepositions have received comparatively little attention. He used retrieval algorithm for the compilation of a list of potential low-frequency complex prepositions which forms preposition – noun – preposition (PNP) sequences as illustrated below:

At, by, for,

From, in, upon, → any singular noun → *with, to, of,*

On, under,

on, for

With, without

Baldwin, T., Kordini, V. & Villaviencio, A. (2009, p. 125) on the other hand, proposes prepositions as part of multiword expressions (MWEs) in three types; verb particle constructions (VPCs), where the verb selects for an intransitive preposition, (such as *break down, chicken out, hand in*), prepositional verbs (PVs), where the verb selects for a transitive preposition, (for instance, *rely on, refer to*) and determinerless prepositional phrases (PP-Ds), where a PP is made up of a preposition and singular noun without a determiner, (for example, *in hospital, at school*).

Clearly, the descriptions of prepositions in terms of its form and meanings are rather complex and could pose problems to ESL learners.

2. Prepositions and Malaysian ESL learners

Prepositions, although they are simple words, they are complex to be learnt. Linguists and grammarians do offer descriptions of prepositions which provide help and guidelines for learners to use prepositions correctly in their spoken and written communication, however, problems remain. In fact, it is acknowledged that prepositions are notoriously difficult to learn and they are notoriously hard for non-native speakers to master (Baldwin et al., 2009; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The problems include the definition of prepositions, the descriptions of prepositions in terms of its forms and meanings and the differences between the use of prepositions in the English language and in the first language of the ESL users.

Arguably, the definition of prepositions itself is rather complicated for learners to grasp. The various definitions of prepositions with their multiple meanings which have been proposed by scholars could cause confusions to ESL learners on the starting point to learn prepositions. Even though the prepositional meanings have been looked into in the interest of space, place or location, their meanings have been however extended to time, direction and others. Such complexities which surround prepositional meanings obviously need more time for ESL learners to understand and be able to use them correctly in communication.

The traditional definition of prepositions itself is unclear. Second language teachers may understand that noun, verb and adjective complement prepositions. However, second language learners may find the relation between prepositions and their complements is difficult for them to understand. Both teachers and learners need to be aware of which words in the category of noun, verb and adjective could be used with certain prepositions. Yong (2001) in her study on Malay and Indonesian learners revealed the problems between the Malay and the Indonesian learners in using prepositions were quite similar. Errors were found in the use of correct preposition after a verb, adjective or noun in expressions like *add to*, *attend to*, *allow for*, *hope for*, *conscious of*, based *on*. These learners also showed the problem in choosing the right preposition in fixed expressions like *with* great courtesy, *in* anger, *by* the back door, *on* the radio, *by* train. The problems in the use of correct prepositions as highlighted in Yong's (2001) has also been emphasized in Botley's (2009) personal e-mail communication. Such complexity of prepositions has consequently led to problems for ESL teachers and learners in using prepositions correctly.

To further support the complexity of the descriptions of prepositions in terms of its forms and meanings, Swan (2001) introduces aspects in which prepositions could pose problems to ESL learners, which include "vocabulary problems, word order, -ing forms, prepositions before conjunctions and prepositions and adverb particles" (p. 436). This can be summarized in the following tables:

Table 1. Summary of vocabulary problems (Swan, 2001)

Problems	Descriptions	Examples
Vocabulary problems	Most English prepositions have several different functions	For instance, one well-known dictionary lists eighteen main uses of <i>at</i>
	Different prepositions can have very similar uses	<i>in</i> the morning, <i>on</i> Monday morning, <i>at</i> night
	Many nouns, verbs and adjectives are normally used with particular prepositions	we say the reason <i>for</i> , arrive <i>at</i> , angry <i>with</i> somebody, <i>on</i> a bus
Word order	In English, prepositions can come at the end of clauses in certain structures, especially in an informal style.	What are you thinking <i>about</i> ? She's not very easy to talk <i>to</i> . You're just the person I was looking <i>for</i> . I hate being shouted <i>at</i> .
-ing forms	When we use verbs after prepositions, we use -ing forms, not infinitives.	She saved money <i>by</i> giving up cigarettes.
	When <i>to</i> is a preposition, it is also followed by -ing forms	I look forward <i>to</i> seeing you soon.
Prepositions before conjunctions	Prepositions are sometimes dropped before conjunctions and sometimes not.	I'm not certain (<i>of</i>) what I'm supposed to do. The question (<i>of</i>) whether they should turn back was never discussed.
Prepositions and adverb particles	Words like <i>on</i> , <i>off</i> , <i>up</i> , <i>down</i> can function both as prepositions and as adverb particles	She ran <i>up</i> the stairs. (prepositions) She rang me <i>up</i> . (adverb particle)

According to Swan (ibid), “often the correct preposition cannot be guessed, and one has to learn the expression as a whole” (p. 436). These problems have been found in studies on the problems in the use of prepositions among Malaysian learners in secondary schools. Saadiyah and Subramaniam (2009) found that prepositions were among the six most common errors in the 72 essays written by the 72 Form Four Malay students. The results showed that the students were confused in using the correct preposition, for instance:

i. So many dirty plates and glasses can be seen everywhere *at (Preposition)* the school canteen.

In sentence (i), the correct preposition is *around* rather than *at*.

ii. The food to cater *to (Preposition)* the students during recess is not enough.

In sentence no. (ii), the preposition *for* should have been used.

iii. As the secretary *at (Preposition)* the club I have been assigned to write report.

While the preposition *of* should have been used in sentence (iii).

Problems in the use of prepositions have also been found in a study conducted by Nor Hashimah, Norsimah & Kesumawati (2008). This study was conducted on 315 Form Two students from three different schools in Johore, the southern state of Malaysia. They were given a cloze test with multiple choice answers. There was only one question on preposition in the cloze test given to these students. The question was as follows:

i. They can be long and thin shape or heavy and stout looking.

The choices of answers were A) *at* B) *in* C) *on* and D) *of*

The correct answer was *in*, however, the results showed the percentage of students who gave the right answer was only between 26.5 % to 32%. The majority of the students in all the three schools were unable to identify the correct usage of prepositions.

Another earlier study by Rosli and Edwin (1989) highlighted the percentage of errors found in the 80 scripts written by the Form Four Malaysian students. The study showed the errors were much higher in those of rural students than those of the urban students in prepositions. Twenty percent of errors were committed by the students in the rural areas and 10% were from the students in the urban areas. The examples of errors in the use of prepositions among students were as follows:

i. wrong choice of prepositions:

Examples: a. *In** the other hand, the entertainment in the country is fishing, planting, jogging and so on.

b. *At** afternoon, I usually come to school.

ii. omission of prepositions:

Example: a. I am * Form Science II.

iii. redundant use of prepositions:

Example: a. After that we went *to** swimming.

Abdul Rashid, Goh & Wan (2004) also highlighted errors involving prepositions in their studies on six essays written by Form Four students studying in a national-type Chinese secondary school in Penang in Northern Malaysia. The errors were identified as follows:

i. wrong choice of prepositions

Example: a. I jumped *on* my feet ... (Correction: *to*)

b. *In* a hot terrible morning ... (Correction: *on*)

ii. Insertion of prepositions

Example: a. My mother was comforting *at* him.

b. She ran back *to* home.

iii. Omission of prepositions

- Example: a. When she heard / the accident, she ... (*about*)
 b. ... wash my face and change / my uniform in a short time.
 (*into*)

At the tertiary level, Ting, Mahanita & Chang (2010) examined the grammatical errors in spoken English of 42 university students. The oral interaction data for this study were derived from 126 simulated interactions in role play situations. The error analysis revealed the highest frequency of preposition errors. The problem with prepositions was as follows:

- i. incorrect choice or misinformation
 Example: a. Wait for me *at* this Sunday – umm – at seven a.m.)
 ii. addition of prepositions when there should not be any
 Example: a. I will *to* buy this bag.
 iii. omission
 Example: a. We can go / watch movie together.

Another problem that the Malaysian ESL learners may have in using prepositions is the differences between the use of prepositions in the English language and in the first language of the Malaysian ESL users, that is, Bahasa Melayu. In a Malaysian context, it is quite relevant to compare the prepositions in the English language and Malay in an attempt to determine whether there would be difficulties in learning or acquiring English prepositions faced by students whose mother tongue as well as medium of instruction is Malay. A thorough comparison between the two languages has been outlined in Sudhakaran (2008) based on Othman (1993, 1985) as cited in Mukundan & Norwati Roslim (2009).

The preposition *in* (*dalam*), where in the case of Malay, *in* is used before nouns that relate to objects such as a picture, story, mirror, while *into* (*di dalam*) is used before a noun that indicates content or denote filling an area or space like a room, river, or a container. In the English Language, *in* has a wider application, since it is also used in other situations too, for example, *in anger*, *in aid of*; whereas *into*, too, can be used in a wider context like *into despair*, *into anger*.

The preposition *from* (*dari*, *daripada*) in Malay has been split into two separate forms; one form to be used before nouns indicating places or direction, for example, *dari* Melaka (*from* Melaka), *dari* angkasa lepas (*from* outer space), *dari* utara (*from* the north); the other *daripada* is used before nouns related to resources, for example, *daripada* emas (*from* gold), *daripada* kayu (*from* wood), *daripada* cermin (*from* glass), or before nouns related to people, for example, *daripada* Ali (*from* Ali), *daripada* kakaknya (*from* his sister). However, here there is a distinct difference; while *daripada* is also used for resources in Malay as in the examples above, in English, the preposition *of* is used instead, for example, in “made *of* gold”, “*of* wood” or “*of* glass”. However, there are instances of a similar usage too, for example, “made *from* the bark *of* the tree”.

In Malay, the preposition *pada* (*at*) is used for names of objects or things that have a “surface”, for example, *pada* mukanya (*at* his face), *pada* kulit buah (*at* the skin of the fruit), *pada* pintu (*at* the door), *pada* langsir pintu (*at* the door curtain), as well as to denote time, for example, *pada* pukul lima (*at* five o'clock), *pada* pagi (*at* morning). Here too, there are differences between the two languages. In some of the examples above, the appropriate preposition in English would be *on* – *pada* mukanya (*on* his face), *pada* kulit buah (*on* the skin of the fruit), *pada* pintu (*on* the door), *pada* langsir pintu (*on* the door curtain), whereas “*at the door*” in English would indicate a different meaning that somebody is outside the door. The usage of *at* for time (as indicated by the clock) is the same for both languages, but with respect to the time of the day, in English, different prepositions can be used as follows: “*at dawn*”, “*in the morning*”, “*at noon*”, “*in the afternoon*”, and “*at night*”.

Another study conducted by Nor Hashimah et al. (2008) also described the incorrect use of English prepositions could possibly due to the differences between the Malay prepositions and the English prepositions. The majority of the students in all the three schools were unable to identify the correct usage of preposition *in* and *of* in the question. The correct preposition is *in* however more than 70% of students gave *of* as the answer. The researchers highlighted that the students who were majority Malay students might have translated literally all the options given into Malay language and decided against the preposition *in*. The preposition *in* has two possible equivalents in Malay, namely, *dalam* or *di dalam*. Imran Ho (2000) proposes that the preposition *dalam* is conceptualized in a 3-dimensional container whereas *in* can be conceptualized in 2-dimensional situation and 3-dimensional container as shown in the examples below:

- i. The shirt is *in* the cupboard.
 ii. Snakes *in* the desert.
 iii. They live *in* Pahang.

The above sentences indicate that the prepositions *in/dalam* are conceptualized differently in Malay and English. The researchers suggested previous understanding that *in* is the equivalent of *dalam* in Malay has to be re-examined.

Students have to be made aware of various usage and functions of English prepositions to make them better users of the language.

In addition to this, Abdul Rashid et al. (2004) conducted a study on six essays written by Form Four students studying in a national-type Chinese secondary school in Penang in Northern Malaysia. All the respondents had their primary education in vernacular schools where Chinese (Mandarin) was the medium of instruction and English was taught as a subject within the school curriculum. Abdul Rashid et al. (ibid.) explained the errors committed by these students could be a result of ignorance of rule restrictions. This was evident in the example given in the errors on the wrong choice of preposition (i. I jumped *on* my feet ...). The Chinese learners have no frame of reference in Chinese for English prepositions. They apply what they have learnt in new situations. After learning “*on* foot”, “*on* one’s feet” and “stand *on* one’s own (two) feet”, the learners may have associated “*on*” with “foot/feet”. Hence, “I jumped *on* my feet” seems to be correct to them. In the case of insertion of prepositions in the other examples (i. My mother was comforting *at* him.) and (ii. She ran back *to* home.), Abdul Rashid et al. (ibid.) explained most Chinese structures require zero preposition. In sentences like “My mother was looking *at* him” and “My mother was shouting *at* him”, the use of *at* is accepted as grammatically correct sentences, hence, it seemed to them it is correct to use *at* in the first example. The second example also drew the same conclusion. The Chinese students learnt that it is perfectly correct to say “went back *to* school” or “walked back *to* class”, therefore, to say “ran back *to* home” seemed to be more correct than “ran back home” for these students.

Evidently, in a study by Ahour and Mukundan (2012), on 12 university students from three ethnicities, Malay, Chinese and Indians, it was found that only the Malay and Chinese groups performed errors on prepositions in their written descriptions on a picture stimulus. The examples in the misuse of prepositions are shown below:

- i. Error: ...is standing *besides* the father ...
Reconstruction: ...is standing *beside* the father ...
- ii. Error: ...sits in...
Reconstruction: ...sits on...

Hence, there were some differences in the use of prepositions found between English language and Malay language (Sudhakaran, 2008; Nor Hashimah et al., 2008) and Ahour and Mukundan, 2012) and between English language and Chinese (Abdul Rashid et al., 2004 and Ahour and Mukundan, 2012). While some of these differences are evident and distinct, others are subtler, and depend to a large extent on the nuances of meaning implied in the context of use of the specific prepositions (Sudhakaran, 2008). Consequently, these add problems to ESL teachers and learners due to prepositions are not used as they are used in the first language of the ESL users.

In addition to Swan’s (2001, p. 436) view that “often the correct preposition cannot be guessed, and one has to learn the expression as a whole”, Wahlen (2001, p. 200) also adds that prepositions “do not have a neat set of rules governing their use. These rules are often complex, and may not be able to ensure accuracy.” Hence, the problems in using prepositions correctly among the Malaysian learners need to be addressed and this requires syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers to play important roles.

3. The role of syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers

Having reviewed the definitions of prepositions and the problems faced by Malaysian ESL learners in using prepositions correctly, it is essential for syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers to pay attention to prepositions. Firstly, There is a need for syllabus designers to evaluate the present English language syllabus for Malaysian learners. The long list of prepositions must be carefully selected by syllabus designers as to which prepositions need to be taught to the Malaysian learners. For example, the syllabus designers may consider to provide a list of prepositions of place and time for the primary schools students and a list of other prepositions for the secondary schools students. Secondly, the textbook writers should prepare the content of the textbooks according to the English language Syllabus for the primary and secondary schools. A clear description of prepositions must be provided in the textbook. Finally, Malaysian ESL teachers should be able to plan strategies and select or adapt appropriate teaching materials to be used in teaching prepositions. All the prepositions stipulated in the syllabus must be introduced and taught repetitively to enhance students’ understanding on prepositions. The teaching of prepositions should also be incorporated into listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a meaningful way.

4. Conclusion

This article has presented the complex definition and characteristics of prepositions. As such, it contributes to the difficulties faced by Malaysian learners in using prepositions correctly. Hence, it is essential for syllabus designers, textbook writers and teachers to be aware of these problems. Undeniably, ESL learners need to study prepositions due to its importance in communication. Using prepositions correctly allow learners to differentiate the meanings of the multiple functions of prepositions and the grammatical constructions of prepositions. Failure to do so, learners will face problems in communication. If this problem is not tackled from school years, it will eventually affect the learners’ communicative ability at tertiary level and later on in life.

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