

# Teaching Prepositions to Very Young Learners

## The Case of *On*

**T**he gradual introduction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at ever earlier stages of obligatory education (meaning that, in some countries, children start learning English when they are three) is challenging educational authorities and designers of classroom materials to adapt syllabuses and teaching materials to the preschool classroom (see Cameron 2003). Research from disciplines such as Cognitive Linguistics, L1 acquisition, and neo-Vygotskian approaches to teaching provides some insights that can contribute to developing pedagogical proposals suitable for these very young learners. This article discusses the benefits of applying some of the insights from these theories to teaching EFL to young learners, focusing on a particularly problematic area—teaching prepositions. Some practical suggestions are offered with reference to the preposition *on*.

### **Teaching prepositions: Traditional practices aimed at older learners**

There can be no doubt about the importance of mastering preposition-

al usage in a foreign language. Spatial and temporal relationships, for example, depend on a restricted number of prepositions for their expression. Although all humans may have similar experiences of time and space, the way that different languages encode these relationships vary significantly. In this sense, it is hardly surprising to find that the most prominent grammars of the English language or EFL course books contain at least one or, in most cases, several sections or chapters devoted to this aspect of the language. However, materials designed for teaching prepositions to very young learners often lack any such detailed treatment, and, indeed, even for older learners the methodological proposals are often unsystematic.

### *Use of icons*

In some cases, pedagogical materials are complemented with the use of icons. Quirk and Greenbaum's (1973) *A University Grammar of English*, or Murphy's (1985) *English Grammar in Use* illustrate the practice of using visual support to clarify their explanations

and to facilitate learning. Illustrations help learners to see and understand the spatial meanings of certain prepositions in English, generally taken to be the most basic senses. Although the use of icons is evidence of a greater concern with explanation and clarification, these materials lack a systematic procedure that would take into consideration the relationship between the concrete spatial and the abstract temporal senses of prepositions, or indeed, their metaphorical uses (Lindstromberg 1996, 1997; Boers and Demecheleer 1998).

### **Semantic extensions:**

#### **Applied cognitive linguistics**

According to cognitive linguists, prototypical knowledge is embodied in our physical, everyday experiences and then mapped onto target domains that are typically abstract. So, space maps onto time. For example, in sentences such as *The task ahead is huge* or *Maureen put the nightmare behind her* (examples from the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*)—*ahead* and *behind* are used to refer to temporal notions. This concept is relevant to the coherent organisation and order of the teaching points (from concrete to abstract) and to enhance learners' gradual understanding and production of the semantic extensions of prototypical meanings to their non-literal uses. The application of this notion to prepositions has been explored, for instance, by Boers and Demecheleer (1998) and in greater depth by Lindstromberg (1996, 1997). The latter offers an account of English prepositions relating metaphorical and prototypical meanings and suggests a series of learning points that includes the use of icons, clarifying meanings by considering semantically-related prepositions or explaining metaphorical extensions, and relating new senses to the ones already known.

#### **Young children**

Activities such as those described above are obviously not aimed at very young children, and their application in the preschool classroom seems unfeasible. For one thing, 3- and 4-year-olds lack the basic mode for these tasks, which is a writing system. For another, the use of icons with young children may also pose certain difficulties. Icons or other visuals comprise a system of representation that replaces direct knowledge of space. After all, language

itself is another system by means of which our representations of the world are constructed. The combination of both representational systems may hinder rather than facilitate young children's learning, since children may find it difficult to match icons and linguistic forms with experiences. Besides, it is very important to bear in mind that very young children's learning of English is accompanied by parallel processes of developing their own L1 and their cognitive systems. They construct and reorganise concepts in the light of the new experiences and information they are exposed to and their social interactions. As has been discussed by Cameron (1994), both the first and second languages play a key role in this organising process, aided by adults who mediate the learning experiences. So, in the EFL classroom, the teacher supplies and systematises the English language input to aid this process of construction and reorganization. The aim of teachers is thus to lay and consolidate a solid foundation of prototypical meanings and relations in order to promote learners' ability to extend these to abstract concepts at a later stage of language learning.

The function of the teacher in this process has received a great deal of attention recently. New trends and research into second language acquisition in young learners have given new life to old ideas, putting special emphasis on the Vygotskyian framework and its application to classroom practices. There are two basic principles in this approach: the negotiation of meaning and the idea of scaffolding. Vygotsky's central theoretical premise is that children are active learners whose learning is guided by the people around them. Parents, teachers, and other adults help children to grasp concepts when they play with them, when they ask them questions and answer theirs, or when they read stories to them. The gap between what children can do on their own and what they can only do with more advanced speakers is their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1962). Providing appropriate mediated learning experiences for children is crucial for their conceptual development and their growing linguistic competence. This means that children progress in their learning when they are helped. In the EFL classroom, the teacher's role is therefore fundamental in this process of laying the proper foundations for solid future development.

### Child language studies

Insights gained from disciplines such as child language studies, in particular research into the natural sequence of acquisition of the L1, can contribute considerably to the design of teaching materials for young learners. More specifically, findings regarding acquisition order of native speakers of a particular language can inform coherent organisation and order of learning points for teaching that language. For example, it has been shown that children of the same age acquire similar spatial concepts in a consistent order: containment (*in*), contiguity and support (*on*) and occlusion (*under*) are the earliest to emerge, followed by the notion of proximity (*next to*, *beside*, *between*), and finally projective relationship (*in front of*, *behind*). This acquisition order has been established with the use of non-linguistic tests and cross-linguistic analysis (Piaget and Inhelder 1956; Johnston and Slobin 1979; Bowerman and Choi 2001). If containment, contiguity/support, and occlusion are primary to children's organisation of space, then it would be advisable to pay attention to these concepts in the first stages of EFL because even 3-year-olds will grasp these spatial concepts and their linguistic encoding in the mother tongue. Consequently, it seems that the first prepositions that should be introduced in the EFL class are *in*, *on*, and *under*. However, in teaching materials designed for early stages, this developmental order is not often taken into account, and it is not uncommon to find *up/down* relations preceding *in* or *on*.

The fact that children experience and talk about similar events, such as putting on and taking off clothing, opening and closing, putting things in and taking them out of containers, and so on, may influence their development of spatial concepts. Manipulating things in space is salient for them. However, the mother tongue may use quite different forms to express these experiences. Focus on the same spatial situation may be different, with language-specific ways of encoding it. Language input helps the learner decide which kinds of similarities and differences among reference situations are important when selecting a word. For example, Bowerman and Choi (2001) observed that while English children are aware, from a very early age, of the important distinction between containment and contact-and-sup-

port, Korean children did not make this differentiation but followed the Korean distinction between interlocked relations and loose relations. The distinction between containment and contact-and-support that is so clearly encoded in the English prepositions *in* and *on* (e.g., *in the box*, *on the wall/on the table*) may, therefore, be not salient in other languages. In fact, in Spanish, one linguistic item, *en*, is usually employed in both contexts—*en la caja*, *en la pared/en la mesa*. Thus Spanish speakers do not need to be aware of the difference between these spatial relationships in the way English speakers do when they linguistically represent these situations. Utterances—such as *the picture is on the wall* or *the cat is lying on the carpet*—that are automatically produced by native speakers of English may pose difficulties for EFL learners if they do not distinguish between the relationship established by the different prepositions. Clarifying this sort of distinction for EFL learners from an early stage may prevent later erroneous utterances such as *the picture is in the wall* or *the cat is in the carpet*.

### The preposition *on*

#### *Sensorimotor experiences of support and contiguity/attachment*

Lindstromberg (1996) distinguishes between two main meanings of the preposition *on*:

1. *on* vs. *off*, when *on* shows contact of an object with a surface.
2. *on* vs. *back*, as in the phrases *go on* or *come back*.

In other classifications, the first prototypical meaning is divided into two different senses. Bowerman and Choi, for example, distinguish between “support” (e.g., *on the table*) and “attachment” (e.g., *an apple on a twig*) as two different senses of *on*. As pointed out above, this distinction between support and attachment may be important when designing teaching activities for learners from a specific country. For Spanish learners of English, for instance, enhancing the two senses may be useful since they find it especially difficult to grasp the sense of “attachment” of the preposition *on*.

Other accounts of the preposition *on* include further meanings such as “pressure,” “constraint,” “covering,” or “visibility” (Beitel, Gibbs, and Sanders 2001). The activities described

below, however, are concerned with the senses of “support” and “contiguity/attachment.” They are suggestions for introducing the preposition *on* to 3-, 4- and 5-year-old learners of English in a way that makes sense to them. Furthermore, the proposals attempt to clarify the above-mentioned basic meanings of *on*, in order to promote their consolidation. This consolidation will allow learners to understand and produce appropriate semantic extensions in later stages of their learning process.

Considering that the language classroom is where the input is going to be introduced, activities need to be meaningful in that setting and to require the use of the suitable preposition. The teacher, as organiser and producer of the English input, will use the target language to describe the tasks involved in the activities and will encourage learners to imitate and produce this language themselves.

#### **A new look at old activities**

##### **1. Total Physical Response activities: Presenting “on,” illustrating the senses of support by and attachment to a flat horizontal surface.**

The senses of “support” and “attachment” conveyed by the preposition *on* can be presented to preschool EFL learners by means of exploring the environment in which they are operating (in this case, the classroom) and the relation of their own bodies to that physical space and to the different objects in it. In this sense, often-used TPR activities may be further exploited to draw attention to these two different meanings. The teacher may illustrate physical actions that involve *on*-relations in the classroom and ask the children to carry them out. Simple instructions such as “get on the chair,” “sit on the floor/cushion/mat” or “crawl on the floor” may be used for this purpose. The teacher may repeat the preposition alone after uttering the whole phrase. As children adopt the *on* position, teachers can draw attention to the fact that the “support” meaning also incorporates some notion of attachment. For example, questions such as “Are you steady?” or “Can you fall?” in the mother tongue direct the children’s attention to the two semantic dimensions of *on*. More complex instructions presented as games or fun activities can also be employed. For instance, we can ask the children to try to balance a piece of paper on their heads. Similarly, they can be asked to

walk *on* a line, previously drawn on the floor with a piece of chalk, and try not to walk *off* the line by carefully putting their feet in front of each other. Again the relationship of the “support” and “attachment” meanings can be pointed out to the learners.

Comparison with other spatial relations expressed by the prepositions *in* or *off* can further aid understanding of support and attachment. In this sense, the contrasting relations established by *on* and *off* can be illustrated by accompanying the previous *on*-instructions with examples with *off* (“get *off* the chair/mat/cushion” or “walk *off* the line”).

Similarly, the spatial notion of containment expressed by the preposition *in* can be presented to the children following the same principle of manipulating objects and using TPR activities. Instructions such as “put something in a box or in your pocket” are only some suggestions of the kind of utterances that may be used. Again, the contrast between *in* and *on* relations can be pointed out to the children by contrasting actions such as “put your hand on your head” with “put your hand in your pocket.”

These activities will allow the learners to experience and compare the different spatial notions while being exposed to the linguistic forms in which they are expressed.

##### **2. Activities related to drawing, displaying, and decorating: Illustrating the sense of attachment to different surfaces.**

Drawing is one of the most basic activities in preschool years. Learners colour in or draw their own pictures. The EFL teacher can take advantage of this opportunity to give the instructions in English, e.g., “Let’s draw a line/circle/picture *on* this piece of paper.” An alternative to drawing can be making a collage where learners actually have to put pieces of paper *on* their collage. In this case, the use of *on* accompanies an attachment meaning. These activities can be carried out using simple materials. In the case of the collage, old newspapers or magazines provide pictures that children can cut out and use. Other materials such as leaves, grass, or sand may be gathered by the children for their own compositions.

It is also common to display these drawings or collages on the classroom walls. Instead of doing this job as a teacher routine, learners can get involved in this activity and be encouraged

to use the L2 while they are doing it: they are putting their pictures *on* the wall. Displays do not have to be limited to learners' work; they can consist of any type of wall decoration: posters, stories, flash cards, charts, calendars, and so on. Some of this material changes at different times of the year or when dealing with different topics, so it is easy to find an excuse to get learners involved in putting new things *on* the wall and taking the old ones *off* the wall, or to draw their attention to the things that are *on* the walls. Local holidays are also a suitable time to work with and display wall decorations.

**3. Activities related to clothes (daily routines, dressing up, puppets): Illustrating the sense of attachment to different surfaces and introducing phrasal verbs such as "put on."**

The vocabulary related to clothes is often introduced at the early stages of EFL. Pieces of clothing are concrete and are familiar to young learners, something they talk about every day as part of their daily routine. In the EFL classroom, apart from revising lexis related to clothing, phrasal verbs such as *put on* and *take off* can also be introduced. An activity children in cold climates engage in daily in winter is taking off and putting on their coats. In warmer climates, some kind of headwear may be worn. A routine can be established with the teacher asking the children in the L2 to take off these items of clothing when lessons start and to put on the items when getting ready to go home.

Dressing up is also a productive activity in the English classroom, and teachers may want to encourage this by asking learners to contribute old clothes brought from home to a classroom dressing-up box. Another alternative is to make costumes in the classroom using cardboard or old newspapers. Children greatly enjoy putting on different clothes and pretending to be different characters. From the English language teacher's point of view, dressing up can also be exploited to present and revise the vocabulary related to clothes and to use the verbs that express the actions of putting on and taking off clothing.

In the preschool classroom, children's birthdays, Saints' days, or other culture-specific celebrations can be great events for the whole class that may be exploited with a dressing-up activity. The birthday boy/girl or whoever is celebrating their day is the protagonist in the

class for one day and can be dressed up as a king/queen. The child may wear a cardboard crown or a shiny robe and carry a plastic sceptre, all of which can be also made in the classroom with leftover paper or cardboard. Again we can take advantage of this opportunity to use the verbs *put on* and *take off* (for example, to ask a child to *put on* the crown) or present or review the pieces of clothing with the children.

An alternative to the children getting dressed up is the use of a puppet or doll to illustrate putting on and taking off different pieces of clothing. The figure used can range from a shop-bought product to an old sock dressed in clothes made from paper. The teacher can bring the puppet into the classroom wearing different types of clothes depending on the weather. Our puppet may also get mixed up and wear some clothes that are completely inappropriate for the season. It might represent a friend from a different country with very cold or warm weather who has just arrived and has not had time to get changed. The puppet will then need to put on or take off some clothes in front of the children. The children or the puppet may also wear jewellery or glasses, which are attached to different body parts (for example, "you wear a ring on your finger" or "he's got a hat on his head").

Teachers themselves will be able to think of many more such tasks, based on the same principles of manipulating objects accompanied by verbal commentary.

## Conclusion

Although the format of the kinds of activities described in this article is likely to be familiar to most teachers of English, it is important to bear in mind that the activities need to be systematically introduced and carried out. Three key points need to be borne in mind. First, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the tasks need to be suitable for the children's cognitive development at these early ages. Secondly, the teacher acts as a mediator who provides the verbal input in the L2 and scaffolds the learners' progressive learning. And finally, clarifying prototypical meanings which may be language specific—for instance, the "attachment" sense of *on* in English—can be done at early stages of the L2 learning process. In fact, it is advisable to do so to avoid errors in the comprehension and production of mean-



ings and to facilitate learners' understanding of the semantic extensions of these basic senses in later stages of the learning process.

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