

# Consciousness-Raising and Prepositions

For a variety of reasons, learning English prepositions is notoriously difficult and a slow, gradual process for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. To begin, English prepositions typically are short, single-syllable or two-syllable words that are seldom stressed when speaking and therefore often not articulated clearly or heard distinctly. Another problem is that prepositions are often conceptually different from one language to the next, and direct translation cannot be relied on. For example, in English “we walk in the rain,” whereas in French we “walk under the rain (*marcher sous la pluie*).” Both formulations seem to make the same intrinsic sense; however, it would strike most English speakers as odd to say that we walk under the rain! This lack of correspondence means that a one-to-one translation will produce an ungrammatical sentence.

These difficulties are compounded by the loose grammatical rules governing the use of English prepositions. For example, one rule states that the prepositions *at*, *on*, and *in*

are used to designate expressions of time. However, these very same prepositions also designate expressions of place and location, which often makes the selection of a preposition a matter of guesswork. The uncertainty about what preposition to use even extends to differences within British and American English. For example, in British (and South African) English it is common to speak of “filling *in* a form,” while American English speaks of “filling *out* a form.” The problem is further exacerbated by regional or social varieties of English that use prepositions in idiosyncratic ways. Then there are those unhelpful (even archaic) rules about prepositions that continue to hold sway, such as the rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition. As Winston Churchill tellingly joked, “The rule which forbids ending a sentence with a preposition is the kind of nonsense up with which I will not put.”

The nature of prepositions obliges ESL students to rely on wide reading, memorization, and dictionaries to learn them. One way to help students

is to introduce *consciousness-raising*, a technique that focuses attention on correct grammatical forms by highlighting or emphasizing them in some way. According to Ellis (1997), noticing a grammatical feature is a necessary and fundamental pre-condition for learning it. Unlike formal grammar instruction, consciousness-raising does not require the learner “to verbalize the rules he has learnt” (Ellis 1985, 244), but instead alerts learners to a particular grammatical feature.

In a review of research into consciousness-raising, Sugiharto (2006) considered grammatical features such as transitive and intransitive verbs, direct and indirect objects, and subject-verb agreement, but not prepositions. There is an apparent need for consciousness-raising activities for prepositions, and this article will describe how I used the technique to promote correct usage of English prepositions in an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) course for secondary school ESL teachers in South Africa.

### English and Xhosa prepositions

Although English is taught as a second language in most South African schools, it is in fact more of a foreign language in most rural areas (Setati et al. 2002). Xhosa is the overwhelmingly dominant home language in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, spoken by 83.4 percent of the population, while English trails far behind as the home language of only 3.6 percent (Statistics South Africa 2003). Since my current ACE course participants are mainly Xhosa-speaking ESL teachers from rural districts in the Eastern Cape, it is imperative that they provide an accurate, proficient model of spoken and written English for their students.

Predictably, Xhosa speakers find that their native language offers little direct insight on how to use English prepositions correctly. Unlike English, which has a large number of individual prepositions, Xhosa has no prepositions as separate words. Xhosa instead uses *locatives* and *formatives*, which are prefixes and suffixes that convey meaning and are attached to nouns (Zotwana 1994). For example, Figure 1 illustrates how five English prepositions are expressed with the Xhosa prefix (*e-*) and suffix (*-ni*). (Thanks to my colleague, Deyi Mbelani, for his help with these Xhosa examples.)

English Sentence	Xhosa Sentence
I'm going <b>to</b> school.	Ndiya <b>esikolweni</b> .
I left it <b>on</b> your table.	Ndayishiya <b>etafileni</b> yakho.
There is no money <b>in</b> your wallet.	Akukho mali <b>esipanjinini</b> sakho.
Zola is coming <b>from</b> the river now.	UZola usuka <b>emlanjeni</b> ngoku.
There will be visitors <b>at</b> my home tomorrow.	Kuzakubakho indwendwe <b>ekhaya</b> ngomso.

Figure 1: Expressing prepositions in English and Xhosa

This again illustrates how distinct prepositions are from one language to the next and underscores the need for a successful method to teach them.

### The ACE instructional context

Given the limited reading resources in many rural Eastern Cape homes and schools (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005), learners depend heavily on their teachers as a direct source of English and successful teaching approaches. However, in spite of a new curriculum introduced in 1998 (Department of Education of South Africa 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, and 2002), teachers continue to struggle with low levels of conceptual knowledge in their subjects (Fleisch 2008). Accordingly, a two-year teacher education course like the ACE addresses the dual challenge of developing language teachers' pedagogical skills as well as their language proficiency. Therefore, teacher-trainees learn the *what*—the core language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar and related aspects of linguistic theory such as genre and critical language awareness, and the *how*—practical and procedural classroom teaching methodology, including sequence and pacing of lessons and an understanding of learning theory and assessment.

The ACE course follows the participatory, interactive, learner-centered approach that the trainees will use with their own students. Nevertheless, as with many schools worldwide, we have to deal with inadequate materials and resources. For example, while a high-level grammar textbook like Quirk et al. (1985) devotes a reasonable number of pages (61 out of 1779) to discussing prepositions,

three South African high school textbooks currently in use mention prepositions only as one of the parts of speech (Angelil-Carter, Bangeni, and Garwen 2006; Angelil-Carter et al. 2005) or as constituents of phrasal verbs (Grant et al. 2005). The fill-in-the-missing-preposition exercises that were common in earlier years are absent. However, since prepositions are so indispensable to communication, and their misuse often distorts meaning, the requirement for correct prepositional usage is essential, especially when writing or speaking in academic contexts or describing abstract relations in more formal contexts.

Fortunately, teachers can draw on alternative resources and methods to teach prepositions and other grammatical components of English. In order to develop the trainees' grammatical knowledge, the ACE course bases instruction on *Grammatical Knowledge for Teachers* (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010), which can be found online. Drawing on the genre approach (Martin 1989; Gibbons 2002), the course links grammar to extensive writing and explicitly teaches the structure of various genres essential to school literacy, including explanation, procedure, report, and argument. Each

teacher is provided with a copy of a grammar resource such as *Collins Cobuild Intermediate English Grammar*. In addition, teachers use additional Internet resources such as the following to explore grammar explanations, examples, and exercises, including the use of prepositions:

- <http://grammartips.homestead.com/index.html>
- [www.chompchomp.com/menu.htm](http://www.chompchomp.com/menu.htm)

### **A consciousness-raising task for prepositions**

Despite a broad focus on grammar, the ACE course initially treated prepositions with benign neglect. Only minimal corrective feedback was provided when students made preposition errors in their oral presentations and written assignments, and prepositions were not a focus of follow-up work. However, the number and range of preposition errors in an essay about teachers' professional responsibilities alerted me to the need for a consciousness-raising task. To gather material for the task, I reviewed student-teacher essays on the topic of professional responsibility and identified 14 sentences that contained preposition errors, which are listed in Figure 2.

1. As a role model I refrain to any misconduct.
2. I will make sure that they are transported by a roadworthy vehicle when we are in educational excursions.
3. I must update parents with the well-being and progress of their children.
4. I am sure if we can focus to the policy, then learners can do the same.
5. I will expose learners more on reading and speaking.
6. Learners will know exactly what is expected on them.
7. I will form support groups with other teachers in order to make sure that we keep abreast with developments.
8. I commit myself in having a full understanding of the principles of the curriculum.
9. Teachers should convince the community that they believe and depend to them.
10. This will result to everyone owning the code of conduct.
11. I promise never to bring my profession under disrepute.
12. Our department is very lenient to teachers who misbehave.
13. I will try to discuss the issue informally at a person-to-person basis.
14. Some teachers are not familiar to the curriculum.

**Figure 2: Fourteen sentences with preposition errors**

I converted this list into a wall-chart by printing the 14 sentences in a large font on a piece of paper. I also included some tack adhesive and an envelope that contained 20 prepositions written on small squares of pink paper. At the start of the class I took five minutes to explain to the teachers that each sentence contained at least one preposition error, which they needed to identify and correct by choosing among the 20 prepositions and pasting the correct pink square over the error. To increase the difficulty of the task, I included six extra prepositions on the list. As the students stuck new prepositions in place, I marked the correct choices with a red tick and removed any incorrect options.

To my delight, teachers gathered in front of the preposition chart and corrected the sentences. The chart became abuzz with activity as students in pairs and small groups discussed the errors and different preposition options. In a short time the teachers had successfully corrected all the mistakes, thanks in large part to the most proficient English speakers. This conforms to research indicating that grammar consciousness-raising is most effective with high intermediate level learners (Mohamed 2004). (See the Appendix for the 14 correct prepositions and the list of 20 prepositions provided as options.)

What was the consciousness-raising value of this task? Teachers certainly noticed prepositions as an important part of speech, focused on the error, and worked collaboratively to discover the correct options. The first step, picking out the prepositions in the sentences, was the easy part of the task. The learning that took place occurred in the second step—choosing the correct options. While deciding on the correct option, teachers debated the rules and conventions of preposition usage, thereby sharpening their conscious, explicit understanding of prepositions. The chart stayed on the wall for some time, allowing students to reflect on the corrected sentences and compare them with their own usage of prepositions.

One limitation to this exercise is that the fast learners, and probably the most proficient English speakers, did most of the work. However, because many of the sentences on the chart came from the writing of students with weaker English skills, the task provided

an anonymous, non-threatening way for better students to assist their peers in correcting errors.

An alternate way to conduct this activity is to divide the sentences among several groups. After each group corrects their sentences the whole class discusses all the sentences and the teacher elicits feedback about the prepositions.

## Conclusion

If ESL teachers are to be good models of English speakers, teacher trainer courses need to focus not only on knowledge of English pedagogy, but also on the ability of teachers to identify, self-correct, and ultimately reduce their own English errors. Among all the challenges of mastering English grammar, the appropriate use of prepositions is one of the most difficult. This consciousness-raising task was valuable because it was interesting to the trainees and made them aware of a neglected area of grammar in an interactive setting where they were able to determine correct prepositional forms by negotiating meaning. An added benefit of this consciousness-raising task is that the teachers learned how to expand their repertoire of activities in their own classrooms, to teach not only prepositions but also other aspects of grammar.

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## Consciousness-Raising Task to Correct Preposition Errors

*Consciousness-Raising and Prepositions • Monica Hendricks*

### Key: Fourteen Sentences with Correct Prepositions

1. As a role model I refrain **from** any misconduct.
2. I will make sure that they are transported in a roadworthy vehicle when we are **on** educational excursions.
3. I must update parents **about** the well-being and progress of their children.
4. I'm sure if we can focus **on** the policy, then learners can do the same.
5. I will expose learners more **to** reading and speaking.
6. Learners will know exactly what is expected **of** them.
7. I will form support groups with other teachers in order to make sure that we keep abreast **of** developments.
8. I commit myself **to** having a full understanding of the principles of the curriculum.
9. Teachers should convince the community that they believe and depend **on** them.
10. This will result **in** everyone owning the code of conduct.
11. I promise never to bring my profession **into** disrepute.
12. Our department is very lenient **with** teachers who misbehave.
13. I will try to discuss the issue informally **on** a person-to-person basis.
14. Some teachers are not familiar **with** the curriculum.

### List of Twenty Preposition Options

with	into	by	in
beside	in	of	on
from	on	to	behind
at	to	on	with
on	of	about	under