

**COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC APPROACHES TO TEACHING
PREPOSITIONS IN EFL CLASSROOMS**

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ABSTRACT: This article examines effective pedagogical and cognitive approaches to teaching prepositions in English language instruction. Prepositions frequently represent a significant area of difficulty for English language learners, particularly those coming from agglutinative first-language backgrounds, due to structural differences and conceptual mismatches. The article discusses the linguistic and cognitive-semantic foundations of space and time prepositions (in, on, at), utilizing the concepts of Trajector and

Landmark. Furthermore, it presents a range of pedagogical strategies including conceptual visualization, collocation practice, and contrastive analysis. The study emphasizes that effective grammar instruction should move beyond mechanical memorization toward meaningful cognitive mapping in order to improve learners' communicative competence and structural accuracy.

Keywords: prepositions, cognitive semantics, spatial relations, conceptual mapping, contrastive analysis, English grammar teaching, EFL methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is a fundamental component of language learning, and its effective teaching plays a crucial role in developing learners' communicative competence. Among various grammatical structures in English, prepositions represent a common area of difficulty for second language learners. These forms originate as closed-class lexical items but function as essential structural and semantic markers with multi-layered cognitive roles.

The difficulty of prepositions can be explained through both linguistic and pedagogical perspectives. Linguistically, languages like English rely heavily on analytic structures (prepositions and word order) to express spatial, temporal, and abstract relationships. In contrast, languages belonging to agglutinative families (such as Uzbek) utilize synthetic tools like case suffixes and postpositions to convey identical functions. Consequently, learners frequently confuse these forms or rely on direct translation interference, which results in persistent grammatical and communicative errors. Therefore, identifying effective teaching strategies for prepositions based on conceptual frameworks is essential for improving learners' accuracy and performance in English.

THE COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC FRAMEWORK

One of the most effective ways to understand the nature of prepositions is through cognitive semantics, pioneered by linguists like George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker. In cognitive linguistics, spatial prepositions are not viewed as arbitrary structural links; instead, they represent a mental scene consisting of two main elements:

Trajector (TR): The focal object that is moving or being located.

Landmark (LM): The reference object or background context used to locate the Trajector.

For instance, in the sentence "The book is on the desk," the book serves as the Trajector, while the desk acts as the Landmark. The preposition on indicates a cognitive relation of contact on a two-dimensional surface.

Furthermore, human cognition naturally projects spatial structures onto temporal concepts (the Spatio-Temporal Metaphor). This is why the same spatial logic transfers seamlessly to time metrics:

In: Used for 3D enclosed spaces (in the room) and broad periods of time (in May, in 2026).

On: Used for 2D surfaces (on the wall) and linear calendar days (on Monday, on my birthday).

At: Used for a specific 0D point in space (at the door) and exact moments in time (at 5 o'clock).

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES AND METHODOLOGY

To overcome traditional translation interference, grammar teaching should combine explicit conceptual explanation with contextual communicative activities. The following methodologies have demonstrated significant efficacy in the EFL classroom:

1. Conceptual Visualization

Instead of asking students to memorize abstract rules, instructors should employ diagrams, geometric shapes, and interactive grids showing the positions of the Trajector and Landmark. Visualizing in as a container, on as a surface contact, and at as a point target reduces cognitive confusion and enhances long-term retention.

2. Dependent Preposition Collocations

Learners struggle when prepositions are presented in isolation. Teaching prepositions as chunks or fixed collocations combined with verbs and adjectives (e.g., interested in, depend on, proud of) helps students absorb patterns naturally within contextualized sentence blocks rather than individual units.

3. Contrastive Analysis

Directly comparing the analytic prepositions of English with the case inflections of the native language in structured tables allows students to see patterns clearly. Highlighting that an English preposition can match multiple case suffixes or postpositions helps minimize negative language transfer.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, prepositions represent a challenging but essential area of English grammar for second language learners. The main difficulty lies in moving away from literal translations and understanding the underlying cognitive distinctions of space, direction, and time. Effective teaching requires a combination of conceptual visualization, dependent collocation practice, and contrastive analysis. When these methods are applied together, learners are more likely to develop a deep understanding of grammatical meaning rather than relying on rote memorization. As a result, their fluency, accuracy, and communicative confidence in English significantly improve.

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