Acquisition of Prepositions by ESL Learners through Dictation Tasks

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Abstract

The study examines the acquisition of English prepositions by Sinhala speaking learners of English with respect to four fine-grained categories of prepositions found by Littlefield (2006) using first language acquisition of English speaking children. The acquisition order of these four categories found by Littlefield: adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], particles [-Lexical, -Functional], semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional], and functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional], showed an advantage of [-Functional] features over the [+ Functional] features. One of the aims of the study was to find out whether this ranking was good for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in tasks that tap comprehension knowledge (dictation task). The second aim was to see whether at initial stages of learning, there was an advantage of either [+Lexical] features or [-Functional] features, which disappeared at later stages of learning. 316 Sinhala speaking learners of English studying in Grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 answered a dictation task with 40 sentences, 10 each with adverbial prepositions, semi-lexical prepositions, particles and functional prepositions. Sentence length and structure was controlled and sentences differed only in the category of preposition used in them. The main findings of this task were as follows: (1) ESL learners imitated the four categories of prepositions differently in the dictation task. (2) [+Lexial] prepositions were better imitated than [-Lexical] prepositions initially, and this 'lexical' advantage disappeared in Grade 10 with all categories being used with comparable accuracy. These findings are recommended to be used in the ESL classroom to facilitate teaching prepositions.