Acquisition of fine-grained categories of preposition by ESL learners

ABSTRACT

The study examines the acquisition of English prepositions by Sinhala speaking learners of English with respect to the fine-grained categories of prepositions proposed by Littlefield (2006). Littlefield posited four categories within the prepositional domain: adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional], particles [-Lexical, -Functional], and functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional]. She also found evidence for the existence of these categories through first language acquisition, children acquire the prepositions in a particular order: adverbial, particle, semi-lexical, and finally functional. The present study aims to help validate or disprove that this type of fine-grained approach to preposition on the basis of ESL learners responses in a dictation and a production task.

If the fine-grained approach is shown to be effective with prepositions, then ESL learners will use the different categories in the tasks differently. Littlefield’s study was on naturalistic speech of first language children, where [-Functional] features were shown to rank higher than [+Functional] features in acquisition. One of the aims of the study was to find out whether this ranking was good for ESL learners and in tasks that tap comprehension (dictation) and productive (picture story writing) knowledge. The second aim was to see whether at initial stages of learning, there was an advantage of either
[+Lexical] features or [-Functional] features, and which disappeared at later stages of learning. The third aim was to see whether this initial advantage is found in both comprehension and production tasks. Along with these aims, the study also looked into errors that learners make in using different categories of prepositions.

316 Sinhala speaking learners of English studying in Grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 answered a dictation task with 40 sentences, 10 each with adverbs, 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. 307 of these learners also wrote a picture story where prepositions needed to be abundantly used. Percent accuracy and percent proportion use of each category were calculated.

The main findings of the two tasks were as follows: (1) ESL learners were found to respect the fine-grained categories of prepositions and they imitated and produced the four categories of prepositions differently in the two tasks. (2) In the dictation task, adverbs and semi-lexical prepositions were better imitated than particles and functional prepositions (i.e. [+Lexical] seemed to rank higher than the [-Lexical] features). This ‘lexical’ advantage disappeared in Grade 10 with all categories being used with comparable accuracy. (3) However, in the picture story task, adverb and particle accuracy of use was at ceiling, while semi-lexical and the functional preposition accuracy was significantly lower (i.e. [-Functional] appeared to rank higher than the [+Functional]). In the distribution of use, adverbs and semi-lexical prepositions were used more than particles and functional prepositions. (i.e. [+Lexical] ranked higher than the [-Lexical]...
features). In accuracy, grade level showed significant difference, while the distribution of use was similar across grades. (4) There were more omission errors in the lower grades and more substitution errors in the higher grades in both the tasks. In both the tasks, category features were preserved in substitutions (i.e. semi-lexical prepositions were mostly substituted by another semi-lexical.) (5) When the two tasks results were compared, learners at lower grades showed a sharper difference in the performance on the tasks and the imitation task was more difficult. In higher grades, the two tasks showed comparable performance.

This thesis is organized in six chapters. Chapter One presents a discussion of second language acquisition, a comparison between first and second language acquisition and some acquisition difficulties with special reference to English prepositions. Chapter Two presents different categorization of prepositions and their theoretical explanation, and reviews Littlefield’s fine-grained categorization of prepositions, along with the empirical evidence for this categorization. Chapter Three mainly describes the methodology of the present study and the research questions and hypotheses. Scoring and analysis of the study are also focused here. Chapter Four presents the main findings of the dictation task supported by the analysis of errors. In Chapter Five, findings of the picture story task are presented with the error analysis. Comparison between the results of the dictation task, the picture story task, and the Littlefield’s 2006 study are also presented. Chapter Six summarizes the findings of the two tasks and discusses some implications of the study and gives a few suggestions for further research.