



SHEIKHBAHAEE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**Using Image-Schemas in Teaching Prepositions and Promoting
Learner Autonomy: A Cognitive Linguistics-Inspired Approach**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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September 2013

In The Name of God

Sheikhbahaee University



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THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

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ENTITLED:

**Using Image-Schemas in Teaching Prepositions and Promoting
Learner Autonomy: A Cognitive Linguistics-Inspired Approach**

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A. IN
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IS ACCEPTED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS
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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

To my dear parents

For everything

Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to all the wonderful people in my life whose scientific, financial, and most of all, moral support made this degree possible.

First of all, I wish to express my special thanks to Dr. Alibabae who showed me the road and helped me get started on the path to this thesis. He was always available for my questions and he was positive and bestowed his time and knowledge generously.

My thanks also go to other friends for their roles, direct and indirect in helping this thesis be written.

The support, encouragement and kindness of my two dear sisters are forever appreciated. It is the two of you credit giving me a competitive spirit. Thank you for having such a positive role in my life. I can just say a thank you to them with my heart and soul.

Most of all, I owe a debt of gratitude to my mother and my father for all the times that I forgot to thank them, for all the special little things they do, for all the words that sometimes go unspoken, I need to say I love them. I love them for the way they stop and listen and for their kind support throughout the years and for teaching me the meaning of compassion, and sharing my triumph and my tears. And if at times, I may have seemed ungrateful, I want to say, "I truly hope you see that nothing you have done has been forgotten and day by day you just mean more to me.

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Abstract

The present study sought to investigate the role of CL-based instruction on EFL learners' learning of English prepositions and developing learner autonomy. To this end, 60 Iranian EFL learners at lower intermediate level of language proficiency were randomly assigned to two groups; experimental and the other control. Then, the two groups filled out a 32-item autonomy questionnaire and also took a 40 item test consisting of multiple-choice and suppletion items assessing their knowledge of English prepositions including 'on', 'over', 'around', 'for', and 'under', as the ones under investigation in this study. After that, the experimental group received a CL-based instruction of the five prepositions whereas the control group received traditional instruction on them. Finally, the two groups were given the same questionnaire and test to see to what extent the CL-based instruction had been effective in their acquisition of the prepositions and also on their perception of learner autonomy. From the statistical analysis of the participants' performance, it could be informed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the test of English prepositions. Therefore, it can be said that this superiority of experimental group originates from the CL based instruction that was used in this study. But the results of the analysis of learner autonomy showed that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant and the CL-based approach didn't affect on the performances of the two groups for learner autonomy.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

This first chapter tries to show the whole study with an emphasis on the statement of the problem, and the reasons that make this study significant and distinct from other studies briefly. Based on the research problem, two research questions are raised and finally definitions of the key terms of the study are presented.

1.2. Preliminaries

Cognitive linguistics (CL), a modern school of linguistics, argues that our knowledge of the world helps us interpret complex meanings (Evans & Green, 2006). It is an approach to the study of language that assumes that much of our knowledge is not static and language refers to what is represented to human conceptual system that is influenced by body actions and experiences (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Talmy, 1988). Taylor (2002) stated that cognitive grammar refers to the idea that language is symbolic in nature. As human beings can think based on their reasons in dealing with language, some experimental investigations have applied CL approach in grammar, semantic, phrasal verb and vocabulary (Evans & Tyler, 2004a). English preposition is also a good device for the application of CL instruction for meaningful learning. CL states that the many

meanings associated with a single preposition are systematically related in meaningful ways (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

On the other hand, helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become an important matter in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, (Benson, 2001). One of the most important issues for foreign language teachers is to make students self-sufficient, autonomous learners who can manage their own learning inside and outside of the classroom to be able to achieve their goals, understand their needs, know about learning styles, monitor the learning process, and make self-evaluations for independent learning (Louis, 1999). According to Little (2002), autonomy is decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction. When students become more involved in their own learning, and have an active part in making decisions, they may learn in more meaningful ways and it results in better classroom performance. Cognitive perspectives also emphasize the role of learners rather than teachers and materials (Slavin, 1995) and support if students use their knowledge and experiences in learning, it improve their critical thinking (Abrams, 2005). This emphasis has provided some changes in education, such as focus on process rather than product (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). When autonomy increases, learners will be more efficient, effective and motivated (Little, 2002).

Applying CL perspective has provided many successful conditions for EFL learners in recent years (Boer & Lindstromberg, 2008).). Therefore, this study aims at examining the role of cognitive linguistics based instruction in learning figurative English prepositions and also in learner autonomy.

1.3. State of the problem

The acquisition of English prepositions is really a difficult field for students learning English as a second language. Prepositions are words that show a relationship of meaning between two parts of a sentence and indicate how the two parts are related in space or time (Yule, 2006). The definition of prepositions is related to their location in a phrase (Talmy, 2000), because they are located before a noun. However, prepositions are often vague and confusing even for native speakers. Language teachers and researchers have recognized that the acquisition of English prepositions causes major challenges for second language learners (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In other words, “they will be perceived if students achieve native-like proficiency in speech and writing” (Cowie, 1993, p.38). So, it is so important to learn, comprehend and use prepositions in EFL contexts.

Boquist (2009) presented an example about the difficulty of perceiving prepositions used for finding an address. Luis is a new student at the local college and an English language learner. He wants to go grocery shopping, so he asks his friend about the nearest grocery store. His friend replies: “Go around the corner, and through the first two intersections. Turn right, you should see a gas station on the corner and a shopping center behind it. The grocery store is in that shop”. Luis should be very clever to find the grocery store. Finding the store is very difficult according to the used prepositions and depends on where Luis is standing (Boquist, 2009). He states that directions like these are not the only situations in which English language learners have trouble with prepositions.

Many textbooks have been published about prepositions to emphasize the significance of them; there are Benjamins (2010), Essberger (2012), and Tyler & Evans (2007); and some examples of dictionaries are: Longman dictionary prepositions after adjectives (2005), Oxford dictionary of current idiomatic English: verbs with prepositions and particles (2008), and using a Cambridge dictionary for help with idiomatic prepositions (2009). However, still prepositions are problematic for EFL learners. It may be related to the ways preposition are taught.

The existence of numerous different meanings related to a single preposition is one of the most challenging subjects for EFL learners (Tyler & Evans, 2003). First, prepositions are polysemous. Polysemy is “a semantic characteristic of words that have multiple meanings” (Koffi, 2010, p. 299). The majority of prepositions in English have different meanings depending on context. Second, each language has its own set of rules (James, 2007; Jie, 2008). These positional words usually come before the noun in English, but in some languages they come after and are considered as postpositions. Third, Lam (2009) points out, prepositions can be difficult to recognize, particularly in oral speech, because they usually contain very few syllables. Many English prepositions are monosyllabic, such as on, for, or to. As a result, language learners may not be able to recognize prepositions in rapid speech. Moreover, the use of prepositions in context varies greatly from one language to another, it may cause negative syntactic transfer. The same prepositions can contain different meanings in various languages. For instance, “a native speaker of Spanish would have difficulties translating the preposition *por* into English, since it can be expressed in English by the prepositions for, through, by, and during” (Lam, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, learners should not focus on prepositional knowledge from their first language. If learners consider “assumptions of semantic equivalence between the first and second languages”, it often results in prepositional errors (Lam, 2009, p. 3). So learners would think applying and

using prepositions are random and unsystematic and would feel confused in using them and most EFL learners may avoid them. Finally, the most challenging point about prepositions is how they are taught, or rather, how they are not taught (Bland, 2003). So this study attempts to consider a solution for teaching prepositions in a better and more systematic way.

The traditional teacher-centered classroom has become limited in focusing on learners' capacity to learn autonomously (Lee, 2010). In the new century, the importance of learner autonomy has increased in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning (Benson, 2001) and there are some reasons to support learner autonomy in language learning (Finch, 2000). There are two general benefits in making learners more autonomous. First, if the students learn by themselves, it is likely to be more efficient and effective. Second, if learners are responsible for their learning, they will be more motivated. Based on the above-mentioned statements, the current study focuses on CL to help students use image schemas and encourage them to learn faster and better in a meaningful way and also investigates autonomy of students to develop the awareness of their ability to plan, understand and regulate their own learning.

1.4. Significance of the study

Much interest has been raised in applying cognitive linguistics to L2 learning. (Tyler & Evans, 2003). CL is applied to English prepositions for instruction. Prepositions are considered as one of the most difficult parts of the language for ESL students because their meaning is unpredictable from their components in the figurative prepositions not predictable from its components. The present study tries to develop a new view about the approach in a motivated and systematic way rather than the traditional approach that focuses on memorization and rote learning having such hard and time-consuming tasks. The CL tries to help students use image schemas and

encourage students to learn faster and better in a meaningful way. The current study will focus on learner autonomy to develop the awareness of their ability to plan, understand and regulate their own learning. Regarding the fact that prepositions are frequent in spoken English, the approach proposed in this study would show the way to Iranian learners to obtain good knowledge about this important part of the English language.

1.5. Research questions

This research aimed at investigating the usefulness of CL approach for teaching prepositions and improving autonomy in Iranian EFL learners. The following research questions were proposed to guide this study:

- 1) To what extent does using image schemas for teaching prepositions yield different results from traditional approaches such as the use of dictionary definitions, memorization and use of examples?
- 2) To what extent does CL based instruction improve learner autonomy among learners?

1.6. Definitions of key terms

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) is a new school of linguistic thought that originally began in the early 1970s because of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language. It states linguistic behavior is not separated from other general cognitive abilities but considered as an integral part of it. It stresses how language is processed in the mind and also proposes that human knowledge is not arbitrary and static; but is principled, structured and systematic with different patterns of human

physical experience in the environment, bodily action, and manipulation of objects (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Talmy, 1988).

Figurative or idiomacity is one of the features of idiomatic prepositions when the meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of the components and do not carry their literal meaning. In other words, “their concrete meaning is extended to abstract, non-visible domains such as thoughts, intentions, feelings, attitudes, relations, etc.” (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003, p.1). Thus prepositions are difficult for ESL/EFL because they have literal as well as figurative (e.g., Boers & Demecheleer, 1998).

Learner autonomy stresses the role of learner as an active key factor in learning processes and concerns the importance of the concepts of learner-centeredness and autonomy. Autonomy is taking charge of one’s own learning and self-directed learning, or learning in which learners themselves determine the aims, progress and assessment of learning (Benson , 2001).

Prepositions are words (at, in, near, with, without) that indicate various relationships between words or phrases in sentences. The relationship includes those of time, points, position, direction and other actions and things (Yule, 2006).The definition of prepositions is related to their location in a phrase (Talmy, 2000), because they are located before a noun.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

This chapter is divided into three basic parts. The first part presents the Cognitive Linguistics framework, its basic conception and feature from beginning to teaching prepositions. The second part focuses on preposition classification, definition and different approaches applied for teaching it. The third part stresses learner autonomy, learner autonomy in cognitive processes and previous research on learner autonomy.

2.2. Cognitive Linguistic (CL) and prepositions

My grandmother was a great one for mixing historical lessons in with child rearing. A favorite, regularly used when one of the grandchildren was being rebuked for failing to satisfactorily complete some minor task and was, consequently, being required to do it over¹, involved pointing to the needle-point text hanging over² the sofa which read, ‘We won’t come back ’til

it's over³, over⁴ there.' This was inevitably followed by the question, 'Where would the world be if they hadn't done their jobs properly?'

Tyler and Evans (2003, p.1)

The above text shows that four different meanings are attributed to the single preposition of 'over'. CL states that the multiple distinct meanings associated with the same lexical form are often related in a systematic way (Tyler & Evans, 2003). Tyler and Evans propose that:

Prepositions/particles offer rich and fascinating evidence of the complex interaction between spatio- physical experience, the human conceptual system and language use. Consequently, they represent an excellent 'laboratory' for investigating the way in which spatial experience grounds many other kinds of non-spatial, non-physical concepts (p. ix).

Cognitive approaches to prepositions have provided a different view from the traditional linguistic approach. Much work has been done in the last 25 years to find a relationship between the different meanings of English prepositions. Cognitive Linguistics has paid great attention to polysemy and specifically to the meaning of prepositions (Cuyckens & Radden, 2002; Lindner, 1982; Pütz & Dirven, 1996; Radden, 1989; Tyler & Evans, 2003; Vandeloise, 1994). One of the most important aspects of cognitive linguistics is that everything in language is related with meaning. Therefore, meaning is considered to be a matter of conceptualization of how particular language users understand the world anthropocentrically, subjectively and under the influence of a specific cultural surrounding themselves (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). In that sense, man's conceptual system is postulated to be grounded in his physical experience, ie. conceptual categories, the meanings of words, sentences and other linguistic structures are considered to be motivated and grounded in one's concrete, direct experience with the surrounding world, with which one interacts through perception, motion, handling different objects, etc. (Tyler & Evans,