

The complex situation with prepositions in the English language: A tiny word with much importance

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Introduction

It is known that the English language is one of the most spoken languages in the world. With a large population speaking it as their L1, it has also become one of the learned languages as L2. Whether it is for pleasure or need, the English language has acquired a high place on the podium of most spoken languages. Some people may learn it to be able to read their favourite English writers, or they may have been influenced by North American culture. Others may come to learn English due to having moved to an English speaking country. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that learning English is both a need and/or a desire to most.

Speaking English that mimics a native English speaker takes more time and effort. As a matter of fact, I remember speaking to a highly-esteemed professor of languages who shared an important anecdote with me. As a professor of languages for many years, she had taught students from all over the world and with different needs to learn a new language. In a particular case, she had a couple of students from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who were learning a second language—Italian. Nevertheless, for these students, it was imperative to pick up on cues related with inaccuracies such as accents, mispronunciations and lack of properly using specific words, and/or grammatical structures. It was important for them to be aware of the English language and how it may be misused by people who were learning English. Being part of an institution that performed investigations and also worked with immigrants, it became imperative being able to catch anyone illegally in the country. They would know how to use language in a way that would de-masquerade anyone pretending to be a born citizen of the United States. The secret to catching anyone illegally was their speech of the English language. However, it was noted that after a few years of being in the United States and with the opportunity to learn the language, it became more problematic distinguishing a citizen with an illegal person. Hence, an observation that they would focus on was how the *suspect* spoke the English language by using the appropriate preposition. Given that a native speaker would have learned well how to implement any preposition, it was then more noticeable to catch anyone who learned English as an L2, and therefore, could have been in the country, being considered an *illegal alien*.

The difficulties of the preposition

Given that my request to perform this study has nothing to do with the CIA's interest in catching *illegal aliens*, but rather to do with how to support ELLs to speak English like a native speaker, I focused on the use of prepositions. The idea was to help students use the appropriate preposition that follows a specific verb. At times, the verb would combine well with more than one preposition; however, in those cases, the meaning would change. More than being wrong, it may become embarrassing when misusing the wrong phrasal verb. It is important to clarify that a phrasal verb is a verb and preposition combination that is used in a full sentence or a phrase. Though the verb may be the same in several instances, the fact that a specific preposition is attached to the verb changes the meaning of the sentence and/or phrase. For this reason, it became important for me to teach phrasal verbs and/or verbs and their prepositions intentionally, to facilitate both oral speech and written language.

When working on this assignment, I tabulated the amount of times that mistakes were made when using prepositions. This is what I found:

Preposition in question	Use of preposition	Occurrence of error	Total opportunities to use the preposition(s)
in vs on	I was born in December and I was born on December 25	148	150
in vs on	I live on campus	140	150
in vs on	The child is on the bus	150	150
in vs on	The teacher is on a leave	141	150

Navigating through this study, I found important to explain one tool that is used in Ontario, Canada, to determine an appropriate and efficient level of English for an English language learner; this is called the STEP continua.

The STEP continua

The STEP¹ continua comprise a few checklists that determine language proficiency. Steps to English Proficiency, better known by its acronym STEP, is divided into primary (grades 1–3), junior (grades 4–6), intermediate (grades 7–8) and senior (grades 9–12). These documents exist for both ESL and ELD programming. Though similar in essence, the language competences (observable language behaviour) vary depending on the programming. Each STEP continuum contains oral, reading and writing sections, which comprehends a set of competences. The language learner (English as L2), would fulfill a specific section of the observable language behaviour in order to move forward, from one stage to the next. These *stages* are known as steps. Therefore, a student who is in step 3 in reading, has already shown aptitude towards all the

¹ The STEP Continua (Steps to English Proficiency) can be found in www.edugains.ca

competences in step 1 and 2, thus working at the step 3 level. The same also applies to the oral and writing forms of the STEP continua. It is assumed that an overall level of English is given depending on how well the student performs on all 3 components. However, in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, it is a common practice to place the level of the English language learner the same as their reading STEP. Thus, a student who is placed as a STEP 2 in reading, would be considered a STEP 2 English language learner overall. The idea of the STEP continuum is to push the language learner forward by teaching them specific language skills based on where they are. It is important to clarify that though the indicators in the STEP continuum are not meant to be used as a final report (in the student's report card), it is used in conjunction with the curriculum and to facilitate an appropriate report comment.

Among the STEP continuum, there are 6 main levels, which are also known as steps, and these range from 1 to 6; where 1 is for a student who is recently learning the English language, and 6 is mastering the English language. STEPs 1–3 and sometimes 4, require extra support from the teacher, which may be seen as modifications of expectations (in number and level of difficulty) and accommodations, which usually allow extra time for a determined activity and/or task. STEPs 5 and 6 are already working at grade level expectations and, therefore, students who have accomplished these levels are becoming to master English as their second language. However, based on conversations, anecdotal exchanges, and careful consideration with STEPs 5 and 6 students, it was noticed that these students may require extra attention when it comes to appropriately using prepositions in order to acquire a near-like native fluency in English. For this reason, I decided to ask more than 100 students who are in the range of STEPs 5 and 6, both in grades 1 to 12 and in university settings (performed in a period of 20 months) questions where they would need to choose the appropriate preposition with:

- i. a group of 3–4 prepositions to choose from
- ii. no support at all
- iii. a free writing activity where the student's written work is assessed by placing extra attention on their usage of the prepositions

Supporting fluency in speech for English language learners (ELLs) to imitate native speakers (English = L1) is one goal that as an ESL/ELD educator I would like to accomplish. When speaking either at conferences or in meetings with fellow teachers, the question that stands out is how to help a STEP 5 (higher level of English) student truly speak English like their native English (L1) peers. Considering that the STEP continua focuses on 3 strands of language, which are oral (listening and speaking), reading, and writing, we hope to have covered all types of language indicators to produce bilingual students with a similarity language skills in English as their English-native speakers. However, the issue that I see most is in regards to how to properly use prepositions.



It is noted that native speakers of English have heard how to use the English language since birth. This means that since their beginning, they have heard their parents speak to them by employing verbs and their respective prepositions. Terms such as: look up, wake up, drive thru, put on, sleep in, among others, have already made their way to their linguistic portfolio (being implemented correctly and abundantly). However, what it is noticed through the course of this short yet concise study, is that most ELLs lack the knowledge and/or the ability to use the appropriate preposition following the right verb in question.

What is a preposition?

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a preposition is “a function word that typically combines with a noun phrase to form a phrase which usually expresses a modification or predication”. That is, a preposition usually is combined with a verb or a phrase to form either a new phrase or a new meaning. Take for example the verb (in its infinitive form) *to sleep* and the phrase *sleep in*. Both cases have a similar meaning; however, the latter one adds a specific meaning to sleep, that is, to sleep until a late period of time. Similarly, this happens with the verb *to look* and *look up*; where in the former, it is used to ask someone to focus on an item or a specific point, while in the latter, is used to pay attention towards the front, or towards an activity being done. In both cases depicted, the preposition adds a specific and even an added meaning to the verb and consequently, to the meaning of the sentence.

Prepositions are essential in any language (at least in English, Spanish, Italian, and French), as it helps the language user convey a fluent and precise message. In English, prepositions acquire an added value, and that is that it may alter the meaning of a sentence with or without its presence. Such small words may enrich the value of a sentence; at the same time, omitting their proper usage or utilizing the wrong preposition may convey a wrong message either in language structure and/or in meaning, therefore, missing the *linguistic* mark. Hence, learning how to employ such nouns (prepositions are nouns) become essential in the pursuit of speaking English in a native manner. In the following, you will find different phrasal verbs, the times they were used in the exercise, and the amount of times an error was committed.



Examples of phrasal verbs

Preposition in question	Use of preposition	Occurrence of error	Total opportunities to use the preposition(s)
Put: on, in, out, forward	<p>The girl puts on her favourite t-shirt.</p> <p>The teacher puts in his thoughts.</p> <p>I put out the fire in the kitchen.</p> <p>The class puts forward a new learning goal.</p>	120	150
Check: in, out, on	<p>We check into the hotel later today.</p> <p>“Check out this new game.”</p> <p>His mom checks on his bruised leg.</p>	140	150
Used: for, to, at	<p>This tool is used for fixing the door.</p> <p>I used to play soccer many years ago.</p> <p>This was used at the store.</p>	130	150
Close: in, down, off	<p>She is closing in on her baby.</p> <p>The store is closed down.</p> <p>The street is closed off from the public.</p>	141	150
Look: over, at, into, on, overlook	<p>The students look over their own tests.</p> <p>It is pleasant to look at the stars on a clear night.</p> <p>I will look into getting new tires for my car.</p> <p>The team overlooked the strength of their opponent.</p>	118	150

The idea of this study was to help students (whenever possible) implement such verb and preposition combinations to facilitate fluency in a native-like way. It was noted that when a student made a mistake, a correction would be given to them automatically and then a short explanation followed. However, the majority of the times, the student was reminded how the preposition with the verb was utilized. At times, it was important to explain the difference in meaning when a distinct preposition was used. For example, the verb *drive* and now add the prepositions *by*, *through*, or *in*. In the first case, (*drive by*) it was explained



that the phrase *drive by* is intended for an occasion where there is a person (or more) passing by a house and shooting at a specific target (usually a home or a person). Moreover, a *drive thru* (through) is used for picking up food at a restaurant by means of a vehicle and approaching a specific window of the restaurant where one would pay and pick up a food order. Finally, *drive in* would be used specifying driving into a place, such as a drive-in theatre where one can watch a movie from the comfort of one's car. Though all cases use the same verb *drive*, the meaning of these phrases (*drive by*, *drive thru*, *drive in*) changes according to the preposition that is being implemented. Finally, another example that I would like to point out are the phrases *in your way* and *on your way*; where the former is used to describe a person or an object that is in someone's way. For example: *The child fell because the box was in his way.* *On your way* may be used to explain that someone is on their way to a specific location, such as: *"Honey, I am on my way to the store. Could I get you anything?"* Given that both sentences use a different preposition (in and on), their meaning (in the main clause) where *my way* is seen changes. Furthermore, it becomes important showing examples of both cases (which are both correct) in their own contexts.

Another common example are the phrases *hang on*, *hang in*, *hang out* and *hang up*; where *hang on* is used to hang an object on the wall and/or when a person is hanging onto an object, such as when rock-climbing, *"hang onto the closest jug on the wall."* *Hang in* is used to express a desire to stay on task and focused, such as *"I know this is difficult, but hang in there."* Furthermore, *hang out* is used to express going out and being (physical space) with someone. *"Today, I am hanging out with my friends."* Finally, *hang up* is used when a person terminates a phone call with someone else, such as *"I could not say goodbye because he had hung up the phone"*. I specify all of these due to being difficult for anyone learning English (regardless of their level of mastery) as a second language to grasp the different meanings of each scenario. Though the verb used is the same in every case, it is the preposition attached to the verb that makes all the difference in the meaning of a sentence. For this reason, it is crucial to teach students these verbs with their prepositions so that the students' speech (and writing) skills may become more fluent, efficient, and correct. It would be rather humorous for a student to say that they went to a *drive by* instead to a *drive thru*. In short, there are many other phrasal verbs being used in the English language, which may make the fluidity of oral and written (including reading) expression more troublesome for English as a second language learners.

Finally, I would like for you to take into consideration these final examples with the verb and phrasal verbs *grow up*, *grow out of*, *grow-up*, and *grow into*, and see how these examples could be taught in a way that may show their difference in a specific context.

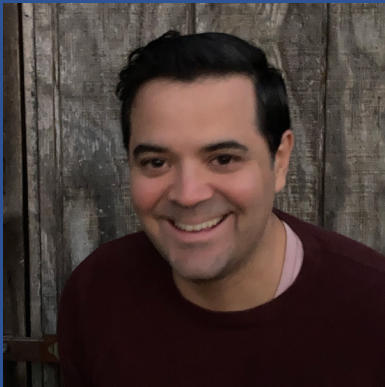


Conclusion

There is no doubt that the English language is well valued by many who are interested in learning it as their second native language. However, as a second language English learner, I know that learning it may cause many confusions, and these may continue even with students who have already achieved a higher level of English. It is clearly noted that prepositions can be a tricky word, which will amend the meaning of a sentence. For this reason, I wanted to explore this topic that could be seen as a conundrum by many English language learners. Nevertheless, by pointing out specific phrasal verbs and using them intentionally in oral, reading, and writing activities, may support the English language learner. For this reason, I find it important to teach this topic whenever possible and to point out and/or highlight an example whenever it is seen. Additionally, explicitly teaching this topic in a reading and then a writing activity, may become beneficial for ELLs. Most people who learn a second language may have as their goal to speak English as a native speaker, and most importantly, not make any of the mistakes that could cause embarrassment.

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