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СОДРЖИНА СОПТЕПТЅ

Jaзик / Language

Билјана Ивановска
ГЕНИТИВНИОТ ПАДЕЖЕН ОДНОС КАЈ ИМЕНКИТЕ ВО ГЕРМАНСКИОТ
ЈАЗИК ВРЗ ПРИМЕРИ ОД ЕЛЕКТРОНСКИОТ КОРПУС COSMAS
Biljana Ivanovska
THE GENITIVE CASE OF NOUNS IN THE GERMAN LANGUAGE
USING EXAMPLES FROM THE ELECTRONIC CORPUS COSMAS9
Книжевност / Literature
Natalija Pop Zarieva, Krste Iliev, Kristina Kostova, Dragan Donev
HUMAN APPEAL TO HORROR; WHEN EASTERN LEGENDS
AND WESTERN GOTHIC MEET
THE WESTERN COTTILE MEET
Krste Iliev, Natalija Pop Zarieva
APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY AND THE ACCOMPANYING
EVIL IN THE FOUR MAJOR SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES ANALYZED
THROUGH MACHIAVELLIAN LENS
Krste Iliev, Kristina Kostova, Dragan Donev, Natalija Pop Zarieva
SHAKESPEARE'S CLEOPATRA – THE VISCERAL AND THE RATIONAL39
Kristina Kostova, Dragan Donev, Natalija Pop Zarieva, Krste Iliev
JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL EMMA ANALYZED AS A CANDIDATE
FOR L'ECRITURE FEMININE 49
Методика на наставата по јазик и книжевност /
Language and literature teaching methodology
Language and meranic teaching membatics,
Marija Krsteva
KNOWLEDGE AND DIGITAL ASPECTS OF STUDYING HUMANITIES63
Игор Станојоски
ЛЕКСИЧКИТЕ ДЕВИЈАЦИИ ВО УПОТРЕБАТА НА МАКЕДОНСКИОТ
ЈАЗИК ОД СТРАНА НА ПОЛСКИТЕ И УКРАИНСКИТЕ СТУДЕНТИ Igor Stanojoski
LEXICAL DEVIATIONS IN THE USE OF THE MACEDONIAN
LANGUAGE BY POLISH AND UKRAINIAN STUDENTS
LANGUAGE DI TOLISITAND URKAINIAN STUDENTS
Марица Тасевска, Анита Стоименова
ЗАСТАПЕНОСТА НА ХЕЛВЕТИЗМИТЕ И ШВАЈЦАРСКАТА
ЦИВИЛИЗАЦИЈА ВО УЧЕБНИЦИТЕ ПО ГЕРМАНСКИ ЈАЗИК КАКО
СТРАНСКИ JAЗИК – SCHRITTE INTERNATIONAL
Marica Tasevska, Anita Stoimenova
THE REPRESENTATION OF HELVETISMS AND SWISS
CIVILIZATION IN GERMAN TEXTBOOKS AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE – SCHRITTE INTERNATIONAL

Мирјана Пачовска	
ФОРМУЛИ ЗА ПОЗДРАВУВАЊЕ ВО УЧЕБНИЦИТЕ	
ПО ГЕРМАНСКИ КАКО ВТОР СТРАНСКИ ЈАЗИК ВО РС МАКЕДОНИЈА	
Mirjana Pachovska	
GREETINGS FORMULAS IN GERMAN AS A SECOND FOREIGN	
TEXTBOOKS IN REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA	87
Неда Радосавлевиќ	
ЕФЕКТИВНОСТ, МОТИВАЦИЈА И УЛОГАТА НА УЧЕНИЦИТЕ	
ВО КОМБИНИРАНОТО УЧЕЊЕ	
Neda Radosavlevikj, Ph.D	
EFFICIENCY, MOTIVATION AND THE ROLE OF THE STUDENTS	
IN BLENDED LEARNING	107
Adelina Ramadani Aqifi	
THE ACQUISITION OF ENLISH LOCAL PREPOSITIONS BY ALBANIAN	
EEL LEADNEDS THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIAN HIGH SCHOOLS	110

THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH SPATIAL PREPOSITIONS BY ALBANIAN EFL LEARNERS – THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Acquiring English as a target language is a very challenging process. The target language has many elements that are distinctive in its role and function. Therefore, Albanian EFL students face challenges learning a foreign language when it comes to particular prepositions. For language educators, it is significant to discover how Albanian EFL students learn spatial prepositions and the difficulties that they encounter in acquiring them. The main aim of the study is to investigate the acquisition of spatial prepositions by Albanian EFL learners; how learners acquire spatial prepositions and if they use them appropriately. The research instruments that are used in this study were students' questionnaire, teachers' interview, and an observation. The research was conducted in three different high schools in Kumanova. Comparison is made with the foreign spatial prepositions and Albanian prepositions during the teaching process. During the acquisition of the foreign language, students face many difficulties that decrease their interest and motivation, and there are cases when learners acquire spatial prepositions and it can be the opposite; they are not able to learn prepositions at all. The results of the study show that Albanian EFL learners have troubles in acquiring spatial prepositions correctly in the target language, in this case English language; students are not able to identify the meanings and usages of spatial prepositions, and cannot use them correctly in the target language.

Key words: Language Acquisition, Learners, spatial prepositions, strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language takes time, and it can be particularly difficult to acquire the grammatical aspects correctly. All languages in the world have many parts that learners find hard to learn such as: articles, prepositions, vocabulary, etc. Consequently, languages have their own functions and rules, all languages vary from each other, and that is why students find a foreign language very demanding and confusing to learn. Then teaching English in EFL classroom might be a complicated process for teachers because there are learners with different background, language proficiency, and needs. Moreover, using different types of learning strategies in the lesson causes challenges for students and professors. It can influence learners'

needs and as a consequence not allow students to learn the target language perfectly. Acquiring prepositions in EFL classroom is a challenging process for learners because there are different types of prepositions in the foreign language in comparison with the native language and for these reason learners most of the times face difficulties during the acquisition of prepositions in English language. The main aim of this study is to discover how EFL learners acquire and use English prepositions in the classroom, which type of prepositions they find most confusing and what kind of strategies they use in order to learn them correctly.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

EFL learners especially Albanian learners have trouble acquiring prepositions because they find them very confusing and hard to understand and use correctly during language learning. Most of the time, learners make mistakes and they are not aware of using the incorrect prepositions because they think that English prepositions have the same meaning with the prepositions in their native language. For this reason, EFL learners are not able to use and comprehend spatial prepositions properly. The importance of this study is to discover why Albanian learners are not able to acquire prepositions appropriately and use them correctly in the foreign language. Additionally, teachers need to find the most useful methods to teach prepositions to learners and help them face with challenges during the acquisition of the foreign language especially prepositions. Prepositions are very important in the second language but they are also very demanding especially for EFL learners. There are many prepositions in the target language and they have multiple meanings and usage too. Due to this, learners face challenges when they acquire prepositions. Prepositions are words that most of the time change their position in the sentence because they can be seen before a noun or a pronoun.

2.1. Research Questions

The research will give answers to the following questions:

- 1. Which are the most challenging prepositions of English language that Albanian EFL learners acquire?
- 2. How do Albanian EFL learners acquire and use English spatial prepositions in different classroom tasks?
- 3. What kind of teaching strategies do English teachers use to teach English prepositions?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

When learning a foreign language, students and teachers have to be conscious that they have problems throughout the second language acquisition. Learners will not acquire the second language quickly because it is different from their native language.

SLA is absolutely complex and very hard because it contains many elements that need to be learned carefully. There are many parts of the second language that learners consider confusing and difficult, especially prepositions. In the second language, prepositions are very difficult because they have different function and relation within the language. According to Akere (1998, p.106), the primary function of a preposition is to express relation in space between one thing and another (as cited in Okanlawon & Ojetunde, 2007 p.98). "Prepositions or relational words are part of the smallest word frames; that is, they are static or settled and shut in it is unrealistic to create extra individuals or stretched out to create new ones" (Parrot, 2014). "They are grammatical forms of units used to demonstrate a significant connection that of time, place, instrumental and causal between two substances, one being that spoken by the prepositional supplement" (Quirk & Greenbaun, 1976 as cited in Ibrahim, Haruna, Ibrahim & Yunus, 2018 p.14). "A preposition is a part of speech which is placed before a noun or a pronoun to indicate a direction, method, place, source, etc. in other words, to show the relation of that noun or pronoun with any other word of the sentence" (Acharyya, 2021). "Prepositions often tell us where one noun is in relation to another (e.g., The coffee is on the table beside you). But they can also indicate more abstract ideas, such as purpose or contrast (e.g., We went for a walk despite the rain)" (Ross, 2021). According to Essberger (2016), "The name "preposition" (pre + position) means "place before". Prepositions usually come before another word, usually a noun or noun phrase: noun, pronoun, noun phrase, gerund (verb in -ing form)". Based on the citations, we can see that prepositions are very important in the target language because without prepositions learners cannot formulate sentences correctly. Learning prepositions is not an easy process because they are small words that have different meaning, function, and usage in the second language.

3.1. Types of prepositions

Prepositions are very significant in the second language, but they are also very difficult to acquire because they have different meaning and usage in L2. Learners often encounter difficulties in accurately acquiring prepositions in second language, particularly English, due to their varied meanings and abundance. According to Owusu (2019), there are five types of prepositions in L2 such as:

(1) Simple prepositions: are one-word and one-syllable prepositions. They are the most common prepositions and usually to determine the location, time or direction of nouns in sentences. Examples are: at, by, down, from, past etc. (2) Double prepositions indicate movement or direction. They can be single or separated words. Examples are: upon, up to, onto, within etc. (3) A compound preposition is a combination of two or more words that function as a single preposition. The words in a compound prepositions can be any part of speech, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Some examples of compound prepositions include: along with, out of, up to etc. (4) The phrasal preposition is a collection of words or phrases that

meet the noun or pronoun in a sentence. When two or more than two words together with any preposition are functioning, it is called a phrasal preposition.

Examples: in front of, with reference to, contrary to etc. (5) A participial preposition is a paticiple (an -ed or -ing verb) that functions as a preposition. Unlike other participles, participal prepositions don't necessarly create dangling modifiers when they don't correspond to a subject.

4. THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to investigate the acquisition of spatial prepositions by Albanian EFL learners in high school classes. The study was conducted with 150 high school students (2nd year) learning in three different high school in Kumanovo, North Macedonia. The findings for the study were collected through English students participating in an online questionnaire. Then twelve classes were observed in group work, individual and peer work in order to capture the reaction and the role of the teacher in these different classes. And ten professors were interviewed in order to get better insights in the acquisition of spatial prepositions by Albanian EFL learners.

5. FINDINGS

The researcher has presented questionnaire results related to the acquisition of spatial prepositions in the classroom, and the questionnaire contained 12 questions but only 3 questions are described.

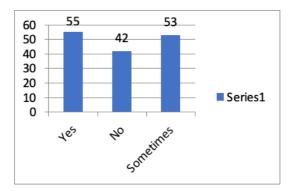


Figure 1. I find prepositions more difficult to understand than any other parts of the speech.

As it can be seen, 55 students find prepositions more difficult to understand, while 42 students reported that they do not find prepositions difficult, and 53 of them reported that prepositions sometimes are the most difficult to understand than any other parts of the speech; this was expected because Albanian learners have troubles to understand prepositions and use prepositions correctly.

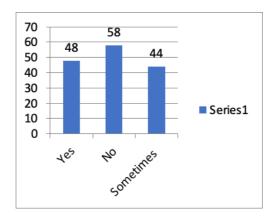


Figure 2. I think there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts

It can be perceived that 48 students expressed that there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts, and 58 students declared that there is not a poor presentation of prepositions and 44 of them affirmed that there is sometimes a poor presentation of prepositions in texts.

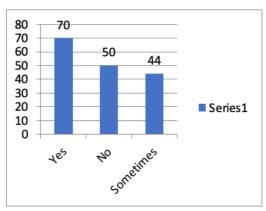


Figure 3. I can understand better simple prepositions (e.g. in, by, on, at, about, under) than complex prepositions (e.g. according to, out of, similar to, in case of)

The results showed that 70 students recognized better simple prepositions than complex prepositions, while 50 students declared that they cannot perceive better simple prepositions and 44 of students affirmed that they sometimes interpret better simple prepositions than complex prepositions.

Then twelve classes were observed in group work in order to capture the reaction and the role of the teacher in these different classes.

Group 1	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
High						V
Average			V			
Low	√	V		V	V	

Table 1. Students' participation grammar exercises.

Table 1 shows data on students' participation in grammar exercises. 1 student participated highly in the class, while another was an average participant, and 4 others were low participants.

Group 2	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
High		√	√			
Average	√				√	
Low				√		√

Table 2. Students' participation of prepositions of place.

Table 2 shows data on students' participation in prepositions of place. 2 students participated highly in the class, while two others were average participants, and 2 others were low participants.

Group 3	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
High				√		
Average		V	√			√
Low	V				√	

Table 3. Students' participation in reading.

Table 3 shows data on students' participation in reading. 1 student participated highly in the class, while 3 others students were average participants. 2 of the students were low participants.

Based on the questionnaire results, it can be concluded that participants find prepositions more difficult to understand than any other part of the speech. This is probably due to the fact that English prepositions have multiple meaning and are difficult to be used in different contexts. As seen in students' responses prepositions are poorly presented in many texts teacher use with their students and this prevent the students to see their presence with the context. It is known that modern teaching methodologies suggest inductive grammar teaching which helps learners to see all grammar features in the context and then the learners deduce rules themselves. Moreover, we had different participation of students in group work because learners

in general had a lot of problems to work in groups; they were not able to use spatial prepositions correctly and many other parts of the language such reading, listening, and writing skills. Most of the time, learners express their knowledge in different ways because they have troubles to use prepositions properly in the classroom and this is the reason that their participation differs because they have different abilities and knowledge in acquiring the target language especially grammar skills.

5.1. Interview results

Ten teachers participated in the interview, each teacher expressed his/her opinion about spatial prepositions usage in the lesson and how learners acquire this type of prepositions based on his/her working experience.

According to teachers, the first language affects the learning of the foreign language especially prepositions and for this reason learners have troubles to acquire prepositions correctly. After that, learners make more mistakes because they always think in the first language and try to translate prepositions in their native language. Moreover, learners cannot differentiate spatial prepositions such as: at, in, and on and they are confused most of the time when they use this type of prepositions. Then, because they are unable to construct sentences in the foreign language and utilize appropriate spatial prepositions, learners struggle when using prepositions. They also get confused which preposition to use because prepositions in the foreign language have multiple meanings and usages. An additional point is that when learners attempt to select the appropriate preposition, they often make mistakes as they opt to translate them in their native language. What is more, the main reason that learners make mistakes in using prepositions incorrectly is that they do not exercise enough, nor read books or improve prepositions usage through video games, worksheets, flashcards etc. According to the teachers, their instruction of prepositions is based on the curriculum and the students' needs. Teachers face problems during the lesson when they teach spatial prepositions especially when they translate prepositions in their native language. Due to the fact that prepositions in English as a foreign language have multiple meanings while in the native language there is only one that is used for every aspect, teachers find it difficult to provide learners with the right answer. To conclude, teachers need to be very careful while teaching prepositions and ought to choose the appropriate strategies to learners in order to understand the meaning and usage of a preposition. And on the other hand, students have to learn and practice the English prepositions more in order to be successful in acquiring them properly.

5.2. Research questions

- Q1: Which are the most challenging prepositions of English language that Albanian EFL learners acquire?
 - Most of Albanian EFL learners find spatial prepositions the most problematic such as: at, in, and on. Students claim that these types of prepositions are very confusing to understand and to use in the language. They state that spatial

prepositions have multiple meanings and usage in English while in their native language-it is different. Students mostly match foreign preposition with their L1 prepositions, and because of this fact they have troubles to learn and use them correctly. Another problem is that Albanian learners try to acquire the foreign language based on the native languages' rules especially regarding the grammar part. They think that English grammar is similar to Albanian grammar and they have troubles to learn the grammar of the other language correctly. Furthermore, Albanian learners do not pay enough attention to spatial prepositions; they do not practice or read more in English in order to improve their language skills particularly regarding the prepositions. Students tend to learn prepositions but they again have problems because they need teachers' help and motivation to acquire spatial prepositions appropriately.

Q2: How do Albanian EFL learners acquire and use English spatial prepositions in different classroom tasks?

Even though that Albanian EFL learners have troubles to acquire spatial prepositions carefully, there are certain strategies or methods that learners use to learn prepositions in different classroom tasks. Students use some specific strategies, and most of the time they tend to guess the meaning of a preposition when they do not know the exact meaning of the preposition in the foreign language. Even if they are not absolutely sure that the meaning of that preposition cannot be correct, they still guess. Another method that learners use is to translate directly from their native language when they use English prepositions. This method of translating directly from the native language is not appropriate because learners are not able to understand prepositions in the foreign language and therefore fail to use them correctly. Learners have more problems and they are more confused when using the translation part because they learn the prepositions based on their native language. When using pictures, flashcards, videos or songs, learners have the opportunity to understand and use spatial prepositions correctly during lesson, which leads to a better understanding of the prepositions' meaning and usage in the English language. The last method that is useful for learners to acquire prepositions is teachers' help during the lesson. Teachers are the main factors or influencers that inspire, explain, and motivate learners in the teaching process. They can help learners to acquire spatial prepositions correctly by giving them different materials, exercises or handouts in order learners to apprehend prepositions accurately.

- Q3: What kind of teaching strategies do English teachers use to teach English prepositions?
 - During the teaching process, most of the teachers use distinctive teaching strategies due to the teachers' dissimilarity. But when they teach English prepositions, they use some of the strategies such as: deductive method because teachers find this method more useful in acquiring prepositions or both methods -deductive and inductive method because they consider both methods to be beneficial in class. Another strategy is the student-centered approach, as well as the usage of materials from the internet like worksheets about prepositions or matching games. But most of the time, teachers use strategies based on their students' level, need, and background. They assess the type of students they have in their classes, finding a suitable strategy to teach prepositions in the easiest way in order learners to find prepositions simple. Also teachers teach prepositions based on the lesson plan, but they again try to give additional explanations to learners. Additionally, there are cases where the strategy depends on the school materials because each lesson is related to grammar skills or prepositions. Teachers use a method based on students' capacity and they explain and give different examples to learners about spatial prepositions. Nevertheless, teachers always teach based on the curriculum, they sometimes bypass the curriculum and focus on the grammar part more in order to provide the learners an explanation that the foreign language is not similar to their native language. Students must be very careful when they acquire the target language especially in terms of the grammar skills such as spatial prepositions as they are one of the most important part of the language.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that spatial prepositions in the foreign language in this case English language are not very easy to acquire and use properly. The reason that spatial prepositions are challenging is that there are different types of prepositions that have distinctive meanings and usage in the language. Because of this, learners are not able to learn prepositions correctly and understand them clearly. Another reason is that nonnative speakers of English acquire the target language based on their native languages' rules and learners cannot make the differentiation between prepositions in their L1 and L2. EFL learners most of the time make mistakes during the acquisition of spatial prepositions and they find prepositions confusing. This happens as a result of a lack of reading in English and they do not practice grammar skills especially the spatial prepositions. On the other hand, there are many differences between first and second language acquisition. The main difference is that L1 is absolutely different because of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling and many other matters.

Having different grammar and its rules, the L1 has a great influence to EFL learners because learners cannot be able to understand that grammar in L2 due to that fact that there are distinctive rules, certain function and meaning in comparison to L1. And this is one of the reason for the EFL learners' difficulties acquiring spatial prepositions i.e. multi-meaning and multi-usage as well. Another factor is that L1 plays an important role in the acquisition of the foreign language is the fact that EFL learners firstly think in their L1 when acquiring the target language. They also do not pay attention to the differences between languages and they make more mistakes in grammar, writing, and speaking during the lesson. But there are cases when L1 is very necessary in the acquisition of the foreign language because learners sometimes need to use L1 in order to understand L2 better. And there are cases when teachers find is that using L1 is easier when teaching L2 in the classroom. In this case learners are able to relate things between L1 and L2, and acquire both languages appropriately. Moreover, it is concluded that teachers should be very careful during their teaching process as they need to use the appropriate strategies in the lesson. Teachers should teach prepositions to learners based on their background, their knowledge and their needs. During the teaching process, teachers need to do an analysis of learners' proficiency in the classroom and apply a suitable type of learning techniques learners use to acquire the target language. They also need to be aware what problems the learners face during the acquisition of the foreign language and how do learners understand grammar of L2 especially prepositions. Teachers need to find out how EFL learners acquire spatial prepositions and what kind of strategies or materials they use to learn and use prepositions correctly. Besides, teachers should notice learners' problems and their lack of knowledge about the target language, as teachers are the main factor in the classroom that can help learners to acquire the foreign language and to use it properly as they have a great influence on learners that can motivate them to learn the language especially in terms of the spatial prepositions. In this case, teachers have to use different strategies in the lesson that can help learners to understand prepositions and explain prepositions clearly.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents some recommendations for teachers and students regarding the acquisition of the spatial prepositions in the target language. The recommendations for teachers are: teachers have to pay more attention to students' needs and background, and be aware of using better learning strategies in the lesson. They need to explain to students that they should not learn the foreign language based on their native language, and have to focus on more grammar skills especially prepositions. The teachers should advise students to practice English more especially the grammar skills, to read more English books and to communicate mostly in the target language. The teachers have to be careful in their teaching process; they must teach students based on students' needs and the students' proficiency level. Also

teachers should not allow the first language to influence in the acquisition of the foreign language; L1 should be used only for specific situations when students have troubles to understand in L2, teachers must be aware of the acquisition of spatial prepositions; that is complex process, and they must help students to learn these prepositions correctly. Students and teachers must work with each other in order to acquire the target language correctly.

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