Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Although English prepositions are notoriously difficult for EFL learners, research on this class of words have been meager. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that English prepositions exhibit a wide variety of meanings and functions, which often causes a great deal of confusion not only among students but also among language researchers. The present paper thus aims to investigate the functions and uses of three most frequently used preposition, namely in, on and at, and further to explore the potential of a cognitive semantic approach to teaching and learning of the prepositions.

In previous studies, prepositions in, on and at have received the most attention. This is partly due to the fact that in, on and at are among the first acquired prepositions for native speakers. In English education in Taiwan, in, on and at are on the list of 1,000 basic words proposed by Ministry of Education for elementary school and junior high school students. Also, the three prepositions are included in level one of most frequently-used vocabulary proposed by CEEC.

By definition, a preposition in English is a word that usually comes before a noun or a pronoun to show its relation to another part of the sentence. For example, in the sentences There was a ball in the box, There was a ball on the table and There was a ball at the door, the words in, on and at are prepositions. They show how the ball was related to the box, the table and the door.

As English prepositions are words linking two entities and thereby specifying the relation of the two, a prepositional phrase is a phrase consisting of a preposition and the noun or pronoun that comes after it, for example, in the box, on the table and at
the door. In the NP an apple on the table, the preposition on links an apple and the table, specifying the relation between the two entities, with the apple contacting the table on the surface. Such a use of on as a preposition with spatial meaning is typical in English. While prepositions are basically used to convey spatial meanings, their function as temporal markers is common. For example, in the sentence There is a concert on Valentine’s Day, the preposition on not only links the event there is a concert and Valentine’s Day but also specifies the relation between the two, with the event falling on a certain day. Besides spatial and temporal senses of English prepositions, there are still other senses in common use. For example, in the sentences You are always on my mind, The Nike shoes are on sale and A study is a piece of work on a particular subject, preposition on does not convey a spatial or temporal meaning, but rather carries senses more abstract than space and time.

Abstract senses in language, as opposed to concrete and basic ones, are referred to as figurative language. In the case of prepositions, senses beyond space and time are conceived to be figurative language. For example, while the sentence There are drinks in the refrigerator is conceived to be portraying concrete meanings, the sentences Keep it in mind and Rose is in the pink are figurative language. Such examples of preposition in well demonstrate the contrast between concrete uses and abstract uses of English prepositions.

Given that English prepositions exhibit various uses, they pose certain difficulty to and meanwhile are often misused by English learners. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983, 1999) point out that English prepositions are so notoriously difficult that even learners with a high-level proficiency in English may still have to

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1 English PPs refer to English prepositional phrases in the construction of ‘Preposition + NP’, such as in the house. Note that English PPs under investigation in the present study exclude phrasal verbs, such as He waits on Mrs. Moore.
struggle with them. To start with, “in their spatial meaning, prepositions do not match well from one language to another. (p. 401)” Moreover, the loose correspondence between two languages “becomes even more problematic when the meaning of prepositions is extended beyond expressing spatial relations to establishing relationships of a more abstract nature. (p. 401)” Similarly, English prepositions have caused problems to English learners in Taiwan, where English is learned as a foreign language. Some domestic studies (Tang 2004, Tseng 2002, Chen 2002, Huang 2001) concerning English writing have reported that English prepositional phrases are among the major misuses to account for learner errors. In fact, high school students and college students alike have problems in using prepositions and their collocating NPs. The learners are confronted with difficulty not just from loose correspondence between L1 and L2 in their spatial uses of prepositions but also from more abstract senses that are hard to grasp. As learner difficulty already surfaces, further research to explore learner errors and identify the difficult areas in preposition acquisition is indispensable.

In learning English prepositions in, on and at, learners often have to resort to English grammar books for a detailed explanation. A detailed elaboration of English prepositions is supposed to exhaust all their various senses. In fact, a full-scale illustration of preposition in should demonstrate its spatial sense, temporal sense and much more abstract senses in examples like the following:

My heart is in my body.

The pictures in his magazine are beautiful.

There are three sessions in one game.

Real estate in Taiwan is expensive.

There are two semesters in a school year.

Advanced robots are not in common use.
He held his brother in a tight manner.

Moreover, a clear presentation of English prepositions should provide linkage in between the seemingly varying uses. For instance, in such phrases as (my heart) in my body, (pictures) in his magazine, (three sessions) in one game, (real estate) in Taiwan, (two semesters) in a school year and (robots) in common use, preposition in should be treated as a polysemy, organized along a metaphoric theme and introduced in a sequence, beginning from spatial use, temporal use and then to more abstract uses.

Unfortunately, in most grammar books the illustrations of preposition meanings and functions often focus merely on the spatial use and the temporal use. Few of them do mention uses beyond space and time, and almost no explicit explanation has been made about the relations between the varying uses. Take for example Far East New English Grammar and Cambridge Grammar in Use. The two popular grammar course books at high schools in Taiwan both exhibit the inadequacy. In both course books, in, on and at are introduced firstly in their temporal senses and then in spatial senses. Take the sections of preposition in for instance. Far East New English Grammar starts with the instructions that “in can be used preceding a specific period or a long period of time” as in sentences John likes to take a walk in the morning and He headed for London in 1988. Following the temporal use is the locative use when in precedes locative words, like sentences Many prehistoric fossils can be seen in this museum and The poor deer was trapped in the hole. (p. 361) Such sequencing of the varying senses of prepositions apparently overlooks the common assumption that concrete objects are supposed to be introduced prior to comparatively abstract objects. That is, while grammar books are supposed to introduce spatial use prior to temporal use, the

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two books do the opposite. Moreover, *Far East New English Grammar* rarely extends its coverage beyond space and time, which obviously falls short of students’ need for figurative language such as *someone in my mind* and *something on my mind*. *Cambridge Grammar in Use* does include other uses along with space and time, for example *in my opinion*, *on purpose* and *at 120 miles an hour*. Nevertheless, the phrases are chosen without a systematic basis, if not totally at random. To be brief, the two grammar books are neither exhaustive in the uses of prepositions nor adequate in the sequencing of the various senses of prepositions.

In addition to the failure in providing a clear description about the nature of English prepositions, EFL grammar course books generally dismiss the effect of L1-L2 differences. In fact, L1-L2 differences have been reported to attribute to EFL learner errors. This factor also applies in the case of learning English prepositions for Chinese students. In Chinese-English dictionaries, Chinese *zai ‘在’* has at least three counterparts in English, namely, *in*, *on* and *at*. The one-to-many unparallel correspondence is often what underlies learner errors. In other words, when one L1 form has three L2 forms in correspondence, learner difficulty arises. In addition, while the Chinese spatial prepositional expressions are represented in the structure of ‘*zai ‘在’* + NP (+ Postposition)\(^3\), English prepositional expressions normally come in the structure of ‘Preposition + NP’. Not surprisingly, the optional or null postpositions in Chinese spatial expressions headed by *zai ‘在’* can cause learners to neglect the specific spatial relation characterized in a corresponding English prepositional phrase, thus multiplying the difficulty. In this regard, most grammar books again fail to achieve descriptive adequacy. With L1-L2 differences left ill-portrayed, EFL learner difficulties multiply.

Since English prepositions exhibit varying uses and have caused common learner

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\(^3\) The postposition is required only when spatial relation is relevant.
difficulty, I would like to investigate the related issues, directing my exploration into the cause of learner difficulty. The purpose of this study is not only to provide insights into the main factors that constitute learning difficulty but also to make a survey of applicable approaches to English preposition instruction for high school students in Taiwan.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions of the present study are as follow:

1. Will metaphor instruction facilitate preposition learning for the students?

2. Which use(s) of English prepositions will present the greatest difficulty to the students, the spatial use, the temporal use, or other figurative language? How are high school students affected by negative L1 transfer in learning English prepositions in, on and at?

3. What are high school students’ attitudes toward instruction of English prepositions?

1.3 Organization of the thesis

This paper is organized as the following. Chapter 1 gives a general introduction to the study. Chapter 2 reviews related research and previous studies on English prepositions. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the present study. Chapter 4 presents the major findings and discuss in detail such issues as the effect of metaphor instruction on preposition comprehension and retention, negative L1 transfer on English preposition learning, learner difficulty from different senses of English prepositions, and students’ attitudes toward preposition instruction, each of which echoes the research questions of the present study. Chapter 5 concludes the findings of the present study.