Chapter 5 Conclusion

The chapter summarizes the major findings of the study. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are included as well.

5.1 Summary of the major findings

In the present study, the designed preposition instruction was carried out through different approaches, i.e. the traditional approach and the cognitive semantic approach. The first research question focused on the effects of the traditional approach and the cognitive semantic approach on the preposition instruction. Comparing the two groups’ performance on the pretest and the posttest I, we see that both groups make significant improvement. In other words, both the traditional approach and the cognitive semantic approach are helpful in promoting the students’ comprehension and retention of English prepositions in, on and at. However, when the two approaches are compared, no significance is yielded with respect to their different effects on preposition teaching and learning for the students in Chupei Senior High School.

The second research question concerned the students’ difficulty with various senses of prepositions in, on and at. Analyses of the two groups’ performance showed that in expressions pose less difficulty to the students than on expressions and at expressions. It is probably because preposition in, with its various uses unified by one core meaning, i.e. containment within an enclosure, is more comprehensible than on and at. In fact, in is more straightforward in its spatial sense than on and at in theirs, thus appearing easier for the students’ comprehension and retention. Unlike in, however, the two prepositions on and at are more divergent in their spatial sense, and they also prove more difficult for the students to relate their various senses to the core meaning. On the other hand, the students’ performance on various senses of a specific
preposition showed that concrete senses like the spatial sense generally cause less difficulty to the students than the temporal sense and other senses that are more abstract. That is because concrete senses are of more semantic transparency than abstract senses, thus causing less difficulty to learners.

The third research question centered upon the students’ responses to the preposition instruction. The results in the questionnaire indicate that before the instruction a high percentage of the students resorted to rote memory in learning English prepositions. Another point revealed in the questionnaire is that a good percentage of students in both the control group and the experimental group show a positive attitude towards the preposition instruction. Nevertheless, the rates of positive responses are relatively higher in the control group, for whom the instruction adopted the traditional approach.

Compared to some previous researches, the present study differs from them in certain ways. The use of metaphors to teach prepositions distinguishes the preposition instruction from the traditional approach, in which a random list of definitions is usually the sole teaching material. Furthermore, as opposed to previous studies that proposed cognitive semantics as an approach to English prepositions (Boers 1996, Boers and Demecheleer 1998), this study is innovative in that it is an empirical study to explore the effect of cognitive semantic approach to teaching English prepositional expressions for EFL learners.

5.2 Pedagogical Implication

On the basis of the study findings, the researcher suggests that EFL teachers adopt the cognitive approach only as supplementary to teaching English prepositions. After all, a large proportion of the preposition uses have been long treated as fixed or fossilized expressions and thus difficult to trace their metaphorical origin. For EFL
learners, these expressions do need memorizing. However, the cognitive semantic approach can still serve as an effective teaching subsidiary from time to time. Though the cognitive semantic approach did not prove more effective than the traditional approach, 50% of the students in experimental group reported that they would learn English prepositions with graphs because the graphs enabled them to know the reason behind the appropriate prepositions. Therefore, the teachers may refer to the cognitive semantic accounts and present the varying senses of prepositions by means of metaphors when the metaphor is easier to envision. To enhance retention, the teachers may introduce the concept of metaphorical extension to help learners compile knowledge of English prepositions and learn in a more systematic way. Practically, the teachers may do some more activities to build up in learners the progression of metaphorical extension from concrete domains to abstract ones. Besides, to raise learner awareness, the teachers may constantly relate the varying uses of a preposition to its schematic graph. In this way, the implementation of cognitive approach to teaching English prepositions may really benefit the students by serving as a complementary source other than the traditional approach.

5.3 Limitations to the study and suggestions for further research

Several respects of the present study are limited and thus desirable for further research.

First, the present study was a small-scale one involving two second-grade grammar classes (70 students in total) in Chupei Senior High School. To achieve a more convincing result, a comprehensive study including a larger size of sample is desired.

Besides, the subjects involved in the present study were high school students whose English proficiency was generally low. The results of the study were thus hard
to generalize to learners with different English proficiency. For a more generalizable result, subjects at different proficiency levels are desired.

Moreover, the whole treatment, consisting of two hours’ instruction, lasted only two weeks. The short period of treatment left little time for the students to explore and digest the nature of English prepositions, especially the more systematic features. Furthermore, due to the time limit, the posttests were administered immediately after the treatment. No follow-up treatment was conducted. It is therefore undetermined whether the outcome of the two groups’ performance would be the same after a longer period of instruction. To reach a conclusion on a more applicable teaching pedagogy, a longer period of time is needed for further research.