Chapter 18

An Evaluation of Preposition Representation in the Omani Basic Education ELT Textbooks: Focus on Grades 1–4

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ABSTRACT

The chapter employed a corpus-based approach to evaluate the representation of prepositions in the Omani Basic Education English language teaching (ELT) school textbooks in Grades 1–4. In doing so, it sought to investigate English preposition distribution patterns in the textbooks in order to understand more about how Omani learners are introduced to them. To achieve this, a corpus of Omani ELT school textbooks was used and a qualitative page-by-page content analysis performed through manual content analysis. Findings indicate that prepositions were not presented with enough frequency for learners to be adequately exposed to them across all grades. Moreover, results suggest that the textbook writers have not considered the frequency distribution of patterns of prepositions during the textbook design phase. Practical implications of these results are offered.

INTRODUCTION

The Omani public school ELT textbooks have been specifically designed by the country’s Ministry of Education to meet the English language outcomes of the Basic Education curriculum. These outcomes cover all core language skills in addition to vocabulary and grammar. While several studies have explored...
various aspects of these textbooks (see Abdenacer, 2006; Al Harrasi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, & Al-Maamari, 2015), as of yet, evaluations have largely failed to explore the presentation of grammar activities in them. The current study sought to begin addressing this by focusing on the representation of prepositions within the grade 1-4 textbooks.

As part of the grammatical system, prepositions represent a particular challenge. Despite the availability of preposition descriptions which act as guides to correct usage, they can be extremely hard for non-native English speakers to master (Baldwin, Kordoni, & Villavicencio, 2009; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Grammar has always been an important concern in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. In Oman, grammar is integrated into the English language curriculum which has an ostensible focus on teaching the language in a communicative, student-centred way (Ministry of Education, 2010). Care is taken not to overload the curriculum with grammatical items at either the Basic (grades 1-10) or Post-basic (grades 11-12) education levels. Instead, these items are recycled throughout the curriculum in the school textbook series “English for Me” for grades 1-10 and “Engage with English” for grades 11-12.

In general, textbooks are argued to offer users a number of advantages including developing the necessary skills for language practice and interaction, offering useful general input for effective language learning, raising users’ language and cultural awareness, and providing a useful source of material for training teachers (Crawford, 2002; Cunningsworth, 1995; Edge & Wharton, 1998; McGrath, 2002; Mukundan, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Richards, 2001; Timmis, Mukundan, & Alkhaldi, 2009; Tomlinson, 1998, 2003). On the other hand, textbooks may also be associated with a number of potential disadvantages. For instance, Woulds and Simpson (2010) claim that textbooks can leave language “dead on the page” and that teachers must utilize all their skills and experience to revitalize textbook language for learners. Other commentators, including Flack (1999) and Pulverness (1999), claim that textbooks are a “necessary evil” in classrooms and that, despite their sleek designs and glossy pictures, they are incapable of capturing learner interest. Despite such criticisms, textbooks have gained wide acceptance as an essential tool in classrooms the world over. As a result, there is a need to examine textbooks to determine if teaching and learning are fully supported by them across contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prepositions and ELT

A preposition can be defined as a word or group of words that often has something to do with location or direction and movement (Hughes, 1992; Kaplan, 1989; Tan, 1994) and time or method (Hughes, 1992). Most prepositions express relationships between things and events and their basic sense is spatial (Borjars & Burridge, 2001). However, understanding a preposition when encountered can be complicated and confusing, especially for ESL/EFL learners. For example, even though preposition relationships to space, place or location have been clearly delineated, their meanings have been extended to time, direction and so on. Such complexities suggest that more time is needed for ESL and EFL learners to understand and begin to use prepositions correctly in communication.

For these reasons, EFL/ESL teachers often face the hard task of helping learners to understand, say, the relationship between prepositions and their complements— which nouns, verbs and adjectives can be used with them and so forth. Yong (2001), in her study on Malay and Indonesian speakers, discovered
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