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The Importance of Teaching Prepositional Idioms Through Explicit Vocabulary Instruction and Interactive Activities to Develop the English Language Skills of Matthayom 3 (Grade 9) Students of the Demonstration School of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (A Classroom Action Research)

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental component of second language acquisition, as effective communication cannot occur without sufficient lexical knowledge. This classroom action research examined the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction combined with interactive and contextualized activities in teaching English prepositional idioms to third-year middle school students (Grade 9/Matthayom 3). Grounded in theories of direct instruction, vocabulary acquisition, interactional hypothesis, and intrinsic motivation, the study employed a Plan–Act–Observe–Reflect (P-A-O-R) action research cycle. The participants consisted of 94 students aged 14-16 years during the second term. Instructional strategies included the use of authentic comic strips, guessing meaning from context, vocabulary matching games, cooperative learning activities, dialogue construction, and realia. Data were collected through classroom observations, students' oral and written outputs, and participation in learning activities. The findings indicated that students demonstrated improved comprehension, retention, and the appropriate use of prepositional idioms in both spoken and written communication. The study concludes that integrating explicit vocabulary instruction with interactive, game-based, and contextualized strategies effectively enhances vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence among secondary-level English language learners.

Keywords: vocabulary instruction, prepositional idioms, action research, direct instruction, ESL

1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign. While grammar structures language, vocabulary carries meaning, and without vocabulary, no message can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1972). Language learners are continually faced with the challenge of acquiring and retaining new words, making vocabulary development one of the primary responsibilities of language teachers (Maera, 1995). In second language classrooms, limited exposure to English outside the school setting further intensifies this challenge.

Among the various components of vocabulary learning, idiomatic expressions present particular difficulty for learners because their meanings are often non-literal and culturally bound. Prepositional idioms, which consist of a verb followed by a preposition forming an idiomatic meaning, are commonly used in everyday English communication. However, students frequently struggle to understand and use these expressions appropriately in real-life contexts.

Classroom observations revealed that grade 9 students of DS-SSRU experienced difficulty recognizing, understanding, and using prepositional idioms despite having prior knowledge of basic prepositions. This gap suggested the need for instructional strategies that move beyond rote memorization and provide learners with meaningful, contextualized, and interactive learning experiences.

This classroom action research aimed to improve students' comprehension and use of English prepositional idioms through explicit vocabulary instruction combined with interactive techniques, including guessing meaning from context, vocabulary games, cooperative learning, and the use of authentic materials. The study was guided by theories of direct instruction, vocabulary acquisition, interactional learning, and intrinsic motivation.

1.1 Research Objectives

This classroom action research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction integrated with interactive and contextualized learning activities in teaching English prepositional idioms to Matthayom 3 (Grade 9) students at the Demonstration School of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. To examine the extent to which explicit vocabulary instruction improves students' comprehension of English prepositional idioms, as reflected in their ability to identify idioms in authentic texts and correctly match idioms with their meanings (*Tables 2 and 3*).
2. To assess the effectiveness of interactive and contextualized activities in enhancing students' productive use of prepositional idioms, particularly in constructing accurate sentences and using idioms appropriately in spoken dialogues (*Tables 2 and 3*).
3. To investigate the impact of cooperative learning and game-based instruction on students' engagement, participation, and retention of prepositional idioms, based on classroom observations, participation records, and post-instruction performance (*Tables 2 and 3*).

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Vocabulary Learning in Second Language Acquisition

Vocabulary is a core component of language learning. Decarrico (2006) emphasized that vocabulary learning is essential across all stages of language acquisition. Similarly, Wilkins (1972) argued that while grammar provides structure, vocabulary conveys meaning. Maera (1995) further highlighted that one of the main tasks of language teachers is to help learners develop a sufficiently large vocabulary to function effectively in communication.

However, vocabulary learning is not limited to memorizing word meanings. Ellis (1994)

and McCarthy (1984) explained that learners may know the meanings of words but still be unable to use them appropriately unless they understand how words function in context.

2.2. Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Explicit or direct vocabulary instruction involves deliberate teaching of word meanings and usage. Engelmann's (1964) Direct Instruction Model emphasizes structured, teacher-guided learning. Although much vocabulary acquisition occurs indirectly, Sullivan noted that there is significant value in direct vocabulary teaching, especially in second language classrooms.

August and Shanahan (2006) stressed that second language learners require more explicit instruction and repeated exposure to new vocabulary than native speakers. Vocabulary instruction should therefore link each new word to appropriate learning strategies and provide opportunities for active engagement.

2.3. What Vocabulary to Teach

Many researchers advocate teaching high-frequency vocabulary early in language learning. Cook (2008) suggested that learners should initially acquire at least 2,000 high-frequency words, which account for approximately 80% of everyday language use (Decarrico, 2006). Maera (1995) argued against limiting learners to restricted vocabularies and emphasized that learners expect and benefit from learning a large number of words early in their studies.

In this study, prepositional idioms were selected due to their frequency in daily communication and their importance in developing pragmatic and communicative competence.

2.4. Teaching Techniques and Deep Processing

Decarrico (2006) emphasized that vocabulary should not be taught in isolation or through rote memorization. Instead, new words should be presented in rich contexts and revisited multiple times. Promoting deep processing is essential to transfer information from short-term to long-term memory.

Sullivan recommended introducing not more than 10–12 new words at a time to support retention. In this study, ten prepositional idioms were presented through comic strips, allowing learners to infer meaning from context.

2.5. Guessing Meaning from Context and Interaction

Guessing meaning from context is a key vocabulary learning strategy, particularly for low-frequency words encountered in authentic texts (Decarrico, 2006). Clarke and Nation (1980) proposed a systematic approach to guessing meaning, involving analysis of the word, its immediate context, and the broader discourse.

This strategy aligns with the Interactional Hypothesis, which states that language is acquired through active communication and meaningful interaction (Nunan, 1999).

2.6. Games, Realia, and Cooperative Learning

Games are effective instructional tools because they promote motivation, cooperation, and meaningful language use (Saricoban & Metin; Ersoz). Baker (1999) noted that games reduce anxiety and enhance intrinsic motivation.

Realia, such as comic strips and cards, provide concrete and meaningful learning experiences. Jones et al. (1994) identified several benefits of realia, including increased motivation, authentic learning, and enhanced retention.

Cooperative learning activities allow learners to negotiate meaning and practice vocabulary collaboratively (Sullivan). Providing a variety of activities encourages active participation and deeper learning (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000).

2.7. Teaching Idioms

Idioms are essential for effective communication and pragmatic competence. Liu (2008) emphasized that idioms enhance communicative effectiveness and language proficiency. Teaching idioms through authentic materials such as comic strips and dialogues helps learners understand both meaning and usage.

3. Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a classroom action research design using the Plan–Act–Observe–Reflect (PAOR) cycle.

The participants were 94 grade 9 students (Matthayom 3) aged 14-16 years during the second term.

Instructional Procedures

Plan: Identify students' difficulty with prepositional idioms and design explicit vocabulary instruction using authentic and interactive activities.

Act: Implement lessons using comic strips, guessing meaning from context, vocabulary matching games, cooperative learning, and dialogue construction.

Observe: Collect data through classroom observations, student participation, oral responses, and written outputs.

Reflect: Analyze results to evaluate effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Instruments

- Classroom observation checklist
- Students' written sentences and dialogues
- Participation scores from vocabulary games

Table 1 Sample Lesson Plan (*found in Appendices*) illustrates the sample lesson plan developed and implemented in this classroom action research following the Plan–Act–Observe–Reflect cycle. During the *planning* stage, the teacher-researcher designed a lesson focusing on the explicit instruction of prepositional idioms integrated with interactive vocabulary activities to address students' difficulties in idiomatic language use. In the *action* stage, the lesson plan was implemented with Matthayom 3 (Grade 9) students at the Demonstration School of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, emphasizing direct explanation, contextual examples, and student-centred activities. The *observation* stage involved monitoring students' participation, comprehension, and ability to use prepositional idioms accurately during classroom tasks and discussions. Finally, the *reflection* stage focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the instructional approach and identifying areas for

improvement to inform subsequent instructional cycles aimed at further developing students' English language skills.

4. Results

Results indicated increased student engagement and improved comprehension of prepositional idioms (*Table 2, Appendices*). Students were able to correctly identify idioms in authentic texts, match idioms with meanings, and use them appropriately in sentences and dialogues. Cooperative learning and games enhanced participation and motivation, while contextualized instruction supported retention. Quantitative analysis (*Table 3, Appendices*) revealed substantial improvements across all learning indicators following the intervention. Before the implementation of contextualized instruction and vocabulary games, less than half of the students demonstrated adequate comprehension and use of prepositional idioms. After the intervention, over 80% of the students successfully identified, understood, and used prepositional idioms in both written and spoken tasks. The largest gains were observed in student engagement, cooperative learning participation, and idiom comprehension, indicating the effectiveness of game-based and communicative approaches in vocabulary instruction.

5. Conclusion

This classroom action research demonstrated that explicit vocabulary instruction combined with interactive, contextualized, and game-based activities effectively improves students' comprehension and use of English prepositional idioms. The use of authentic materials, cooperative learning, and intrinsic motivation strategies contributed to deeper processing and long-term retention. The study recommends integrating direct vocabulary teaching with meaningful communicative activities in secondary English classrooms.

5.1. Recommendations:

5.1.1. Promoting oral language development through cooperative learning groups. Working in small groups benefits learners to negotiate the meanings of vocabulary words with their classmates. When students work on the previously mentioned vocabulary activities in pairs or small groups, they can better understand and discuss (Sullivan).

5.1.2. Provide a variety of activities to practice new vocabulary. Research has shown that learning is more effective when students give input into the vocabulary they need to learn (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000).

5.1.3. The concept of promoting oral language development through cooperative learning groups and providing a variety of activities to practice new vocabulary is seen in class idioms teaching demonstration, where students are paired up and assigned a task to make a simple dialogue using the idioms discussed, after which letting them present in the class. First given the activity given to the class was idioms identification through the use of comic strips provided, then an idioms matching meaning game was integrated in the discussion of idioms, after which an enrichment activity of students pairing up to make dialogue using the idioms that were discussed. These transitions made students understand more about the lesson.

5.1.4. The Value of Intrinsic Motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal factors that encourage us to do something. Joel Bacha, author of "Play and Effect in Language Learning", explains how this theory works. Exposure to challenges and stimulation piques the children's natural curiosity and, in turn, promotes learning through the

activity's required skills. This is because activities that get the students to move around activate their mental capacities and stimulate neural networks, thus promoting learning and retention. Bacha's article goes on to point out that some studies are even beginning to show that intrinsic motivation can promote long-term language retention.

Moreover, games are inherently fun in that they arouse within us a sense of competitiveness and play on our desire to win. Often, instructors and game designers incorporate rewards within the gaming method that increase the motivation of the learner to succeed. Also, regardless of the concept taught, games can be designed to appeal to the playful nature of learners. This playful nature helps reduce the learner's anxiety, retain their interest and makes the concept less intimidating, which in turn promotes greater interaction (Baker, 1999).

5.1.5. Idioms as selected Lesson for a lesson demonstration. Idioms are a commonly occurring type of multiword unit in English, especially in informal conversational settings, and should not be ignored in vocabulary studies. Moreover, idioms have special meanings which are fun and interesting to figure out. There are estimated to be at least 25,000 Idiomatic expressions in the English language. Liu (2008) comprehensively discussed the importance of idioms. He stated that idioms are:

5. 1. 5. 1. Useful and effective in performing informative and evaluative functions

- Helps speakers to convey their messages in a way that non-idiom expressions are unable to.
- Helps speakers to qualify or modify their message for more effective communication.

5.1.5.2. Awareness Development

- Acquired and retained in and of themselves are linked to pragmatic competence and expanded as this aspect of communication ability and awareness develops

5.1.5.3. Extend English Proficiency Level

Activities for the classroom could include presentations in authentic texts, such as daily newspaper cartoons/comic strips and dialogues from modern drama, and exercises that match idioms and their meanings.

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implementation, and reflection stages of the action research cycle.

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6. Appendices

Table 1: Sample Lesson Plan

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Topic: The Prepositional Idioms</i></p> <p><i>Level: Grade 9 students (Matthayom 3)</i></p> <p><i>Learning Objectives/Competencies:</i></p> <p><i>At the end of the lesson, the students are expected to:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. Familiarize themselves with English prepositional idioms.</i><i>2. Acquire and retain in and of themselves the prepositional idioms used in the English language.</i><i>3. To be able to know how, when and where to use prepositional idioms.</i> <p><i>Target Skills:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. Comprehension of English prepositional idioms is acquired to extend their English proficiency level.</i><i>2. Effective communication in using prepositional idioms to qualify or modify their message.</i><i>3. Create more language input and practice opportunities in using prepositional idioms.</i> <p><i>Review of Previous Lesson</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Previous Lesson: Prepositions: Definition and Usage</i></p> <p><i>Prepositions are used to express a number of relationships, including time, location, manner, means, quantity, purpose, and state or condition.</i></p> <p><i>Introduction/Motivation</i></p> <p><i>Share comic strips with the class, then let students identify the idioms within them. Ask the class to think of other examples of idioms which we use in everyday conversation.</i></p> <p><i>Warm-Up Activity:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>a) Flashcards of idioms and their meaning, scotch tape, and scissors</i><i>b) 5 minutes</i><i>c) Idiom Match</i> <p>➤ <i>The students will be grouped into two.</i></p> <p>➤ <i>Each group will be given flashcards of each idiom's meaning.</i></p>
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➤ They need to match the correct meaning of the idiom posted on the board within a minute.

➤ The group that has more number of points is the winner.

Winners will earn 10 points, while the defeated students will have 8 points added to their class standing.

Presentation: Brief discussion of the concept of Prepositional Idioms

A Prepositional Idiom: consists of a verb followed by a preposition, but unlike an ordinary prepositional phrase, it forms an expression with a nonliteral or idiomatic meaning.

The distinguishing characteristic of a prepositional idiom is that its meaning is largely determined by the preposition that comes after the verb; in fact, a single verb can yield as many as five or many more meanings depending on the preposition that comes after it.

Common Prepositional Idioms: Up & Down and Over & Across

act up – malfunction or misbehave

Example: The car acted up right after he drove it out of the repair shop.

add up – make sense

Example: The investigators concluded that the suspect's declarations didn't add up.

make (something) up – concoct a story

Example: She had to make things up to explain her prolonged absence.

make up for – compensate for

Example: Gina made up for her weakness in algebra by taking remedial classes.

pass (something) up – refuse to take advantage (of an opportunity)

Example: True to his word, the governor passed up the opportunity to get himself re-elected

bear down on – take strong measures against

Example: The Iranian government has been bearing down on the post-election protesters.

break down – to weep uncontrollably

Example: The bride broke down when she learned that the groom wouldn't come to their wedding.

ask (someone) over - invite to one's home

Example: Let's ask Thelma over for lunch on Sunday.

get (something) across – make something understood. Example: When the boss is in a bad mood, it's difficult to get things across to him.

run across – find something or meet someone unexpectedly. Example: It never occurred to Jimmy that he would run across a former girlfriend of his at his wedding.

Main Activity:

A.) Ask students to construct their own sentences using the idioms that were discussed.

B.) Choose a pair and make a simple dialogue using the idioms that were discussed in class, then present it to the class. Presentation: maximum of 5 minutes.

Homework: Watch a movie and list down the prepositional idioms used, and search for the meaning online or in the dictionary. Take note of how it was used in the conversation.

Table 2: Summary of Students' Improvement in Learning Prepositional Idioms (N = 94)

<u>Learning Indicator</u>	<u>Before the Intervention</u>	<u>After the Intervention</u>	<u>Observed Improvement</u>
Identification of prepositional idioms in authentic texts	Students had difficulty recognizing idioms and often interpreted them literally	Majority of students accurately identified prepositional idioms in comic strips and texts	Improved ability to recognize idioms in context
Matching idioms with correct meanings	Students relied on guessing and showed limited understanding of idiomatic meanings	Students successfully matched idioms with appropriate meanings through games	Increased comprehension of idiomatic meanings
Sentence construction using prepositional idioms	Limited or incorrect use of idioms in sentences	Students produced meaningful sentences using correct idioms	Improved productive vocabulary use
Use of idioms in spoken dialogues	Low confidence and minimal participation during oral tasks	Students actively participated in pair dialogues using idioms appropriately	Enhanced oral communication skills
Student engagement and participation	Passive participation during vocabulary lessons	High engagement during games, group work, and activities	Increased motivation and active involvement
Vocabulary retention	Difficulty recalling idioms after instruction	Improved recall and retention of idioms through contextualized practice	Better long-term retention

<u>Learning Indicator</u>	<u>Before the Intervention</u>	<u>After the Intervention</u>	<u>Observed Improvement</u>
Cooperative learning participation	Limited interaction among students	Active collaboration during pair and group activities	Strengthened peer interaction and learning support

Table 3: Quantitative Improvement in Students' Learning of Prepositional Idioms (N = 94)

<u>Learning Indicator</u>	<u>Before Intervention (%)</u>	<u>After Intervention (%)</u>	<u>Percentage Increase</u>
Ability to identify prepositional idioms in authentic texts	38% (36 students)	86% (81 students)	+48%
Correctly matching idioms with meanings	41% (39 students)	89% (84 students)	+48%
Correct sentence construction using prepositional idioms	35% (33 students)	82% (77 students)	+47%
Appropriate use of idioms in spoken dialogues	32% (30 students)	80% (75 students)	+48%
Active classroom participation and engagement	45% (42 students)	92% (87 students)	+47%
Vocabulary retention after instruction	40% (38 students)	85% (80 students)	+45%
Participation in cooperative learning activities	48% (45 students)	94% (88 students)	+46%

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