

# **A Comparative Study of the Acquisition Patterns of Prepositions: Adult Sinhala Speaking Undergraduate Students of Learning English as a Second Language in four Academic Years**

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## **Abstract**

English prepositions often pose challenges for Sinhala-speaking learners of “Teaching English as a Second Language” (TESL) in Sri Lanka due to the vagueness and multiple meanings of prepositions. Recognising the need for effective pedagogy in teaching English prepositions, some researchers have explored a categorisation of English prepositions based on +/- Lexical and +/- Functional features. However, there is a research gap in the literature review on English prepositions, focusing on +/- Lexical and +/- Functional categories in relation to Sinhala-speaking TESL adult undergraduate students in Sri Lanka. Only two researchers have researched categories of prepositions by using English-speaking native children and Sinhala-speaking children accordingly. Therefore, the main objective is to investigate whether English prepositions can be categorised using these +/- features as discussed above by analysing selected ‘fill-in-the-blank tasks’ of Sinhala-speaking adult undergraduate learners of TESL at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the second objective tries to identify

a potential order to acquire these categorised prepositions. The sample consists of 20 randomly selected undergraduate Sinhala-speaking students from each academic year of the “Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Four-year Degree” program. A group of 20 sentences was tested with 20 prepositions. First, these prepositions were removed from the 20 sentences, and the students were asked to fill in the correct prepositions in the remaining spaces. Using the ANOVA-HSD Tukey Test in SPSS, significant differences in the accurate usage of prepositions across the four categories were observed for each academic year. The results indicated that prepositions with [+ Lexical] features exhibited higher accuracy than those with [-Lexical] features. These findings show that this potential acquisition order can be utilized to facilitate teaching English prepositions for TESL undergraduate students. These findings suggest that policymakers could adapt curricula to enhance teaching English prepositions for TESL undergraduate students fruitfully.

**Keywords:** *acquisition order of prepositions, [+/- Lexical, +/- Functional] categories, fill-in-the-blank task, Sinhala Speaking ESL undergraduate students*

## **1.0 Introduction**

This study focuses +/\_ Lexical and +/\_ Functional categories of prepositions, and the purpose of the study is to find the order of acquisition of these categories among undergraduates of four academic levels. No other research has been done by using +/- Lexical and +/\_ Functional prepositions using Sri Lankan adult undergraduate students to find their acquisition order. A total of 20 adult students will be randomly selected for this study, and they will be tested with fill-in-the-blanks using the suitable category of prepositions. The ANOVA HSD Tukey test in SPSS will be used to analyse whether + Lexical categories of prepositions are higher than the – Lexical categories of

prepositions, or whether this study shows –Functional categories of prepositions are higher than +Functional categories.

## **1.1 The statement of the research problem**

The teaching and learning of English prepositions have posed challenges due to their inherent ambiguity, leading to unsatisfactory performance among Sinhala-speaking undergraduate learners of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Consequently, there is a pressing need to enhance the pedagogical approaches used in teaching prepositions.

Drawing on existing literature, Littlefield (2009) conducted empirical research using the spontaneous speech production of five English-speaking children and has shown English prepositions can be categorized into four types based on lexical and functional features: Adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], Semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, +Functional], Particles [-Lexical, -Functional], and Functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional]. For instance, adverbial prepositions (e.g., "went down") are identified as pure lexical entities, contributing semantic content but lacking the ability to link sentence elements or provide Case assignments. Semi-lexical prepositions (e.g., "under the table") are characterized by both descriptive content and the ability to assign theta roles and establish spatial relationships, making them [+Lexical, +Functional]. Particles (e.g., "shape up the figure") fall into the category of phrasal verbs and are marked as [-Lexical, -Functional], as they lack substantive meaning and Case-assignment properties. Lastly, Functional prepositions (e.g., "proud of you") belong to the purely Functional category and are categorized as [-Lexical, +Functional] and do not contribute to semantic content but enable Case assignment.

Furthermore, Littlefield's (2009) research indicates that prepositions with [-Functional] features are acquired at a higher rate compared to those with [+Functional] features. Additionally, Littlefield (2006) emphasizes that adverbial prepositions are purely lexical, semi-lexical prepositions are both descriptive and functional,

and particles are idiosyncratic phrasal verbs with neither substantive meaning nor case assignment abilities. Functional prepositions, on the other hand, are solely functional in nature and lack lexical content. This comprehensive categorization provides a foundation for understanding the complexities of prepositions and informs the need for effective teaching strategies to address the challenges faced by ESL learners in Sri Lanka.

## **1.2 The Aim of the Study**

This study aims to find out whether Sinhala-speaking adult TESL learners' correct usage of prepositions in 'fill in the blanks' tasks can be categorised according to Littlefield (2009) using +/- Lexical and +/- Functional features as follows:

Adverbial prepositions [+ Lexical, - Functional]; e.g. went *down*, particles [-Lexical, -Functional]; e.g. *shape up* the figure, semi-lexical preposition [+Lexical, +Functional]; e.g. *under* the table and functional prepositions [-Lexical, +Functional]; e.g. proud *of* you.

The research further examines the order of the acquisition of the categories of prepositions. Therefore, the necessary suggestions can be made to the relevant curriculum developers and policymakers in Sri Lanka to enhance teaching prepositions for adult Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate students more effectively.

## **1.3 Justification of the Research Study**

According to the literature review by Littlefield, 2009, using the spontaneous speech production of five English-speaking children has empirically shown that English prepositions can be divided into four categories using +/- Lexical and +/- Functional features. Moreover, Littlefield, 2009 has found that the prepositions with [-Functional] feature rank higher than the prepositions with [+Functional] feature in the order of acquisition. According to the Literature, this kind of acquisition order of prepositions using +/-L features and +/- Functional features has been addressed by Jayasinghe (2014) using Sinhala-speaking children, in Sri Lanka, and she has proven that + Lexical

feature ranks higher than the propositions with – Lexical features in dictation tasks in Grade 4 and Grae 6 in school, but in Grade 10 this order was disappeared. That means there is no acquisition order by Grade 10. In Sri Lanka, no other research studies have been conducted on Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate students' acquisition order of these four categories of English prepositions (+/- Lexical and (+/\_ F) categories using the filling-the-blanks task.

Therefore, facilitating the pedagogy of English prepositions is essential for TESL students and teachers in state universities. Moreover, investigating the Sinhala-speaking TESL learners' acquisition order of prepositions using the 'fill-in-the-blanks' method by focusing on Littlefield's (2009) categorisation of prepositions is vital. Moreover, making necessary suggestions based on the findings of this study for an appropriate pedagogy to enhance teaching prepositions is also momentous. Hence, this study fills the research gap in the existing topic-based Literature by finding whether these 04 categories of prepositions can be found in the correct usage of prepositions of Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate students, finding the acquisition order of these four categories of prepositions and by finding new pedagogy to facilitate teaching these 04 categories of prepositions using an acquisition order are extremely important.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether Sinhala-speaking undergraduate TESL learners' correct usage of prepositions in the 'fill-in-the-blanks task' can be categorised according to Littlefield (2009) and examine the order of the acquisition of the 04 categories of prepositions and thereby enhance teaching prepositions in the TESL classroom.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

1. Do the Sinhala-speaking TESL learners who use 04 prepositional categories show significantly different performance in the use of prepositions **within** each academic year (Academic Year 1, Academic Year 2, Academic Year 3, Academic Year 4)?

2. Do Sinhala-speaking ESL learners show significantly different performance in using the four prepositional categories **across** each academic year (Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, Year 4)?
3. Is there significant progress in the acquisition of the four categories of prepositions by the selected undergraduates from Year 1 to Year 4?
4. Would [+ Lexical] prepositions be ranked higher than those with [- Lexical] prepositions, where the accuracy of the use of prepositions is concerned, in each academic year?

### **1.5 Research Hypotheses**

1. The Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate learners produce 04 prepositional categories significantly different within each academic year.
2. There is significant progress in these undergraduate students' acquisition of the four categories of prepositions across the academic years (Academic Year 1 to Academic Year 4).
3. The sentences with [+Lexical] prepositions ranked higher than those with [-Lexical] prepositions, in terms of the accuracy of the use of prepositions in each academic year.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Next, literature on the usage of the studies on +/- Lexical and +/-Functional study will be focused on.

### **2.1. *Prepositions and the lexical-functional divide Top of Form Child Language***

Littlefield (2003) delved into the CHILDES database, examining the language development of two children, Naomi and Sarah, over extended periods. Naomi's data covered 3 1/2 years (1;2,29 to 4;9,3), while Sarah's spanned nearly 3 years (2;3,5 to 5;1,6). The primary focus was on identifying lexical and functional prepositions, with Littlefield distinguishing between them using three criteria: (i) functional items lacked denotational meaning, unlike lexical items with referential meaning; (ii) functional items were generally stressless, while lexical items were stressed; (iii) functional prepositions could not be substituted, whereas lexical prepositions could be easily interchanged. Littlefield's significant finding revealed that English functional prepositions emerged later in a child's language acquisition compared to lexical prepositions. Additionally, the overall error rate for functional prepositions was higher (Naomi 40%, Sarah 37%) than for lexical prepositions (12% each). Notably, both subjects initially exhibited a 100% error rate for functional prepositions, confirming a distinct developmental division between acquiring lexical and functional prepositions.

In the categorization of prepositions, Littlefield, 2006 also adds that adverbial prepositions (*e.g. she sat down*) are the pure lexical category and can be categorized with [+Lexical, -Functional] features. They contribute semantic content but cannot link elements in a sentence, nor do they have case assignment properties. Littlefield assigns features for semi-lexical prepositions (*e.g., The cat is on the mat*) as [+Lexical] because they have descriptive content and are [+Functional] because they assign theta roles and establish spatial relationships. They can link elements in phrases through Case assignments. Moreover, she says that particles (*e.g., She ate up the cake*) are an idiosyncratic category called phrasal verbs and are assigned [-Lexical, -Functional] categories. They do not contribute substantive, descriptive meaning, nor can they assign Case. Finally, functional prepositions (*e.g., I am proud of you*) are of the purely functional category and are categorized as [-Lexical, +Functional].

Littlefield, 2006 suggested two possible predictions on the acquisition of the four categories of prepositions. (Jayasinghe, 2014)

(1) ***Predicted order of acquisition (1):***

First: -Functional (adverbial prepositions and particles)

Last: +Functional (semi-lexical prepositions and functional prepositions)

Here, prepositions with [-Functional] features rank higher than those with [+Functional] features.

(2) ***Predicted order of acquisition (2):***

First: + Lexical (adverbs and semi-lexical prepositions)

Last: -Lexical (particles and functional prepositions)

Here, prepositions with the [+Lexical] feature rank higher than the prepositions with the [-Lexical] feature.

It is very important to note that both orders agree with two facts as follows:

- (i) The pure lexical categories (adverbial prepositions) are acquired before the pure functional categories and,
- (ii) The particles and semi-lexical prepositions will be acquired after adverbial and before the functional prepositions.

Consequently, Littlefield administered a longitudinal study as follows to investigate which **order (order one or order two) is correct**.

Top of FormThe analysis of errors showed that omissions were the most common (83%), with substitutions and other errors occurring at lower rates. Omissions were observed across all categories of prepositions. Littlefield emphasized the fine-grained approach, highlighting the error rates as supporting evidence. Functional prepositions were identified as the most challenging category, with an error rate of 19.6%, followed by semi-lexical prepositions (8.3%), while particles (1.5%) and adverbials (1.1%) were considered the least difficult categories.

In summary, Littlefield's empirical study in 2009 concluded that there is a consistent order of acquisition for the four categories of prepositions, with variations in the distribution of adverbial prepositions and particles among individual children. The fine-grained analysis, particularly focusing on error rates, provided valuable insights into the relative difficulty of different prepositional categories in child language.

**Adverb [+Lexical, -Functional]**

**Particles [-Lexical, -Functional]**

**Semi-lexical prepositions [+Lexical, + Functional]**

**Functionals [-Lexical, +Functional]**

Here, the [-Functional] categories (adverbs and particles) take an advantage over the [+Functional] categories (semi-lexical and functionals)

Therefore, Littlefield (2009) confirmed that according to her data set (English-speaking children) and the methodology (speech data) she has used,

**-Functional prepositions > + Functional prepositions**

How ever, this kind of acquisition order of prepositions using +/-L features and +/- Functional features has been showed by Jayasinghe (2014) using Sinhala-speaking children, in Sri Lanka, and she has proven that + Lexical feature ranks higher than the propositions with – Lexical features in dictation tasks in Grade 4 and Grae 6 in school, but in Grade 10 this order was disappeared.

However, there is still a research gap to carry out some other research with **adult students**, focusing on +/- Lexical features and +/- Functional features of prepositions ' acquisition order.

### ***Adult Language Acquisition- the Transition Period***

Within these two overall contexts of the absence of native – speaking peers of the TL , McLaughin (1978) claimed that there is

no language transfer in child SLA unless the child is isolated from peers of the TL, the latter being the classic immersion setting. The idea is that if the child has TL peers, there is a greater social context, where the child learns the L2 rules as if the L2 were an L1 with no language transfer occurring. There are several interesting hypotheses that McLaughlin (1978, p. 117) discusses, one being the regression hypothesis, according to which the child uses the language skills used in L1 acquisition with L2 data, but at a very primitive and rudimentary level. A second hypothesis, the recapitulation hypothesis, involves the child recapitulating the learning process of a native speaker of the TL. In other words, when a child learns an L2, she or he uses the same process available to children of the TL (Million, 1974; Ravem, 1968, 1974).

However, Laughin also noted what could be considered counterevidence to this. Referring to Wode (1976), he pointed out that, “children occasionally use first-language structures to solve the riddle of second-language structures’ (McLaughlin, 1978, p.117, emphasis added).

### **3.0 Methodology of the Current Study**

#### ***3.1 Subjects and their profile***

A pool of 80 students (20 students each from Academic Year 1, Academic Year 2, Academic Year 3 and Academic Year 4) were randomly selected who were following “Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)” four-year degree at the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. This course is conducted in English medium.

In Sri Lanka, the predominant activities, encompassing administration, education up to the secondary level, trade, aviation, shipping, business, etc., primarily occur in the official language, Sinhala. The majority of learners are multilingual, with Sinhala as their primary language and English as their secondary language. This classification is strictly related to the curriculum and is not influenced

by the learners' exposure or the type of input they receive. English is taught as a mandatory second language in Sri Lanka starting from Grade three. As English is regarded as a secondary language, learners have limited exposure to it outside the classroom.

### **3.2 Data Collection and Procedure**

A test was conducted for the students of Academic year 1, Academic year 2, Academic year 3 and Academic year 04 of the TESL Degree. First, these students were explained Littlefield's (2009) findings and theories on the four categories of prepositions that Littlefield found in 2009 and the order of the acquisition of those prepositions, which she has confirmed. Next, the researcher explained the Case assignment in sentences. Ten sentences for each category of preposition were made. A total of  $4 \times 10 = 40$  sentences were administered, removing the prepositions and leaving a space in each sentence. Instructions were given in the test paper, informing that the 80 students should write down the accurate prepositions in the relevant spaces and write down the categories of prepositions using Littlefield's (2009) clarification on 04 categories of prepositions in front of the given sentences (e.g. The book is on the table. - semi lexical). Written instructions for the task were given in English. Thereby, the undergraduate students' progress in prepositions during the 04 years was observed.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

Using an ANOVA- HSD Tukey Test in SPSS, significant differences in the correct usage of 04 categories of prepositions were observed in each year, category-wise. No time limit was set for the task. However, all the learners completed the task within one and a half hours.

The task analysed 80 learner scripts (20 each from one academic year). Each script was marked, and each correct use of a preposition was given a '01' mark, and for identifying the correct category, another mark was given.

## **4.0 Results**

### **4.1 Answering the research questions**

According to Littlefield (2009), categorization of prepositions can be illustrated as follows.

1. **Adverbs** have (+ Lexical and - Functional) features. Therefore, they have a semantic meaning, but they do not have any function (e.g. adverbs cannot assign Case).
2. **Particles** have (-Lexical and -Functional) features. Therefore, they do not have a meaning or function (e.g. they do not assign Case).
3. **Semi-lexical prepositions** have (+ Lexical and + Functional) features. Therefore, they have semantic meaning and also make functions (e.g. Semi-lexical prepositions assign Case)
4. **Functional prepositions** have -Lexical and + Functional features. Therefore, they do not have any meaning, but they can make functions (e.g. Functional prepositions can assign Cases).

Following the above explanation given in Littlefield 2006, the students' answers in prepositions were categorized as Adverbs, Particles, Semi-lexical prepositions and as Functional prepositions. Each accurate Adverb, Particle, Semi-lexical preposition and Functional preposition were marked and awarded '02' marks and calculated the total for each category of preposition in each academic year. Thereby, the mean value of the marks for each category of preposition was computed using descriptive analysis.

Next, the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test was computed using SPSS -22 to find out the significant differences in the performance among the 04 categories within each academic year. Next, the significant differences in the performance of the 04 categories of prepositions across academic years were tested.

In the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test, a significant difference is shown by the p-value.

If  $p < 0.05$ , there is a significant difference.

If  $p < 0.01$ , there is a higher significant difference.

If  $p < 0.001$ , it shows the highest significant difference

### ***Category-wise analysis of performance***

The category-wise performance of the Academic years is presented in *Table 01* with the Mean values of the correct category of the 04 prepositions.

**Table 01**

### ***Mean Values in Category-wise Performance of the four Prepositional Categories***

<b>Category</b>	<b>Academic Year 1</b>	<b>Academic Year 2</b>	<b>Academic Year 3</b>	<b>Academic Year 4</b>
Adverbs	24	50	52.5	58.85
Semi-lexicals	25.5	50.5	57.40	63.60
Particles	03.5	06.5	7.0	12.5
Functionals	02.5	04.5	06	10.5

### ***Academic Year 01***

Adverbs and semi-lexical words have very close mean values.

However, according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test, there is no significant difference in performance between adverbs and semi-lexicals.

Particles and functionals have very close mean values.

However, there is no significant difference in performance between them according to the .Post Hoc Tukey HSD t-test

Adverbs and Particles have a noticeable difference in mean values.

In addition, between Adverbs and particles, there is a significant difference in performance according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Adverbs and functionals have noticeably different mean values

Also, Adverbs and Functional have a significant difference in the performance of marks ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Semi-lexicals and Particles have noticeable differences in mean values.

Between semi-lexical and particles, there is a significant difference in performance according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test ( $p < 0.001$ )

Semi-lexicals and Functionals have noticeable differences in mean values.

Semi-lexicals and Functionals have a significant difference in performance according to the **Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test** ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Therefore, it can be concluded that;

Adverbs (+L, -F) Semi Lexicals (+L, +F) > Particles ( -L, -F) ,  
Functionals(-L, +F)

Therefore, +Lexical prepositions show a higher accuracy than -Lexical prepositions.

**+Lexical > - Lexical**

### ***Academic Year 02***

Adverbs and Semi-lexicals have very close mean values.

However, according to the Post Hoc HSD Tukey Test, there is no significant difference between Adverbs and Semi-lexicals.

Particles and Functionals have very close mean values.

And, there is no significant difference between them.

Adverbs and particles have a noticeable difference in mean values

In addition, between Adverbs and Particles, there is a significant difference in performance according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test ( $p < 0.05$ )

Adverbs and Functionals have a noticeable difference in mean values

Between Adverbs and Functionals, there is a significant difference in performance according to the Post hoc Tukey HSD test. ( $p < 0.01$ )

Between Semi-lexicals and Particles, there is a noticeable difference in mean values.

Semi-lexical and Particles, there is a significant difference in performance ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Semi-lexical and Functionals have noticeable mean values

Semi-lexicals and functionals have a significant difference in performance according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Therefore we can conclude that;

Adverbs (+L, -F) Semi Lexicals (+L, +F) > Particles (-L, -F) ,  
Functionals(-L, +F)

Therefore, [+Lexical ]prepositions show a higher accuracy than [-Lexical ]prepositions.

***+Lexical > - Lexical***

### ***Academic Year 03***

Adverbs and Semi-lexicals have very close mean values.

However, according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test, there is no significant difference between adverbs and semi-lexicals.

Particles and functionals have very close mean values.

However, there is no significant difference between them.

Adverbs and Particles have a noticeable difference in mean values.

In addition, between adverbs and particles, there is a significant difference according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test ( $p < 0.01$ )

Adverbs and Functionals have a noticeable difference in mean values.

In addition, between adverbs and functionals, there is a significant difference according to the HSD Tukey test ( $p < 0.01$ )

Semi-lexical and Particles have noticeable differences in mean values.

Between semi-lexical and articles, there is a significant difference according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Test ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Therefore we can conclude that;

Adverbs (+L, -F) Semi Lexicals (+L, +F) > Particles (-L, -F),  
Functionals(-L, +F)

Therefore, +Lexical prepositions show a higher accuracy than -Lexical prepositions.

**+Lexical > - Lexical**

#### ***Academic year 04***

Adverbs and Semi-lexicals have very close mean values.

However, according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD Tukey Test, there is no significant difference between adverbs and semi-lexicals.

Particles and functionals have very close mean values.

However, there is no significant difference between them.

Adverbs and Particles have a noticeable difference in mean values

Between Adverbs and particles, there is a significant difference in performance in prepositions, according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test ( $p < 0.05$ )

Adverbs and Functionals have a noticeable difference in mean values.

Between adverbs and Functionals, there is a significant difference in performance in prepositions according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test.

Semi-lexical and Particles have noticeable differences in mean values.

Between semi-lexical and particles, there is a significant difference in performance according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD HSD Test ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Semi-lexicals and Functional have noticeable differences in mean values.

Between semi-lexical and functionals, there is a significant difference in performance in prepositions according to the Post Hoc Tukey HSD test ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Therefore it is clear that;

Adverbs (+L, -F) Semi Lexicals (+L, +F) > Particles (-L, -F),  
Functionals(-L, +F)

Therefore, +Lexical prepositions show a higher accuracy than -Lexical prepositions.

**+Lexical > - Lexical**

Therefore, we can conclude that all the academic years (Academic Year 01 to Academic Year 04) show **+Lexical prepositions have a higher performance than -Lexical prepositions**

**+Lexical > - Lexical**

#### ***Examining 04 Categories of prepositions across the grades***

According to two two-way ANOVA test, all four categories' mean values are increasing.

When comparing the findings between Academic year 01 and Academic year 02, there is a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ )

Between Academic Year 01 and Academic Year 03 show significant differences. ( $p < 0.01$ )

Between Academic Year 01 and Academic year 04 show a significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ )

However, between Academic Year 02 and Academic Year 03, there was no significant difference.

Between Academic year 03 and Academic Year 04, there was no significant difference in performance.

1. The results show that within each academic year, the 04 categories show  
+ Lexical prepositions > - Lexical prepositions  
Adverbs, Semi-lexicals > Particles, Functionals
2. Significant progress cannot be seen between Academic year 2 and Academic year 03, and also between Academic year 03 and academic year 04. Between other paired groups, there is significant progress.
3. The results clearly show that [+ Lexical ] prepositions have ranked higher than the [-Lexical ] prepositions within each academic year.

## **4.2. Hypotheses testing**

The results show that:

1. The Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate learners show adverbs and semi-lexical prepositions accuracy have no significant difference within each academic year. Furthermore, there is no significant difference between particles and functionals within each academic year. However, there are significant differences also within each academic year as proven under the ‘results’ , e.g. between adverbs and functionals. Therefore, **Hypothesis 01 is partially proved.**
2. According to the results shown above, significant progress cannot be seen between Academic year 3 and Academic year 04, and also between academic year 02 and academic year 03. Between some other paired groups, there is significant progress. Therefore, **Hypothesis 02 is partially proved.**
3. According to the proven results given above, within each academic year, it clearly shows that [ + Lexical] prepositions show significantly higher accuracy than the [- Lexical] prepositions. Therefore, **Hypothesis 3 is proved.**

Therefore, it concludes that each academic year (Academic year 1, Academic year 2, Academic year 3, Academic year 4) shows that [+Lexical] prepositions show significantly higher accuracy than the [ - Lexical ] prepositions.

### **Examples for these prepositions:**

[+ Lexical, -Lexical] : She went up ( Adverbs)

[ + Lexical,-Lexical] : The book is on the table (Semi-Lexicals)

[ -Lexical, - Functional]: Save up your money (Particles)

[-Lexical, + Functional]: I am proudof you. (Functionals)

### **4.3 Limitations of this study**

This study examined only the Sinhala-speaking TESL undergraduate students of the Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka, who followed the Teaching English as a Second Language degree (Academic year 01, Academic year 02, Academic Year 03, and Academic year 4). This study focused on the order of acquisition of prepositions shown by ESL undergraduate students in fill-in-the-blanks tasks.

## **5.0 Discussion**

The findings of this study on “**A Comparative Study of the Acquisition Patterns of Prepositions: Sri Lankan Undergraduate Students Learning Teaching English as a Second Language**” will be able to make necessary suggestions to enhance teaching English prepositions for Sinhala-speaking TESL Learners. Initially, this paper describes the lexical and functional categories and thereby describes the literature review of the studies on prepositions' lexical and functional division. Secondly, it discusses theoretical and empirical reviews of Littlefield (2009) that address the evidence of lexical and functional syntactic categories in English prepositions. Next, the methodology and the current study's findings are presented clearly. This research study found the acquisition order of 04 categories of prepositions within four academic years of the learners of the Teaching English as a Second Language degree program. This study systematically concludes the relevant pedagogical suggestions on prepositions in the TESL classroom for undergraduate students, using the found order -+ Lexical prepositions > - Lexical prepositions. In other words, this study shows that adverbs and Semi-lexical prepositions show higher accuracy than particles and functionals.

This study suggests further research to investigate whether the correct usage of prepositions of Sinhala-speaking TESL students in writing tasks can be categorized according to Littlefield (2009) and find out the order of the acquisition of prepositions, comparing with two other government universities which teach TESL in Sri Lanka.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The accuracy of the production of the prepositions shows that the adverbial prepositions and the semi-lexical prepositions are higher and significantly different than the accuracy of particles and functional prepositions within the Academic years of these undergraduates. It clarifies that the students get exposed to Adverbial prepositions and Semi-lexical prepositions more than the Particles and Functional prepositions in Sri Lanka. This should be because the students show higher accuracy with Adverbial and Semi-lexical prepositions than with particles and functional prepositions. The particles mean phrasal verbs, and they are idiomatic. We do not have phrasal verbs in the Sinhala language. So, it is difficult for Sinhala-speaking TESL learners to acquire Particles. On the other hand, in Sri Lanka, the usage of Functional prepositions is complex. The students can learn Functional prepositions mainly through memorizing. For example, when ‘I am proud of my son” and “I am happy for my son”, are compared it can be understood the difficulty of acquiring functionals for Sinhala-speaking TESL students. This research suggests that the pedagogy on teaching prepositions for undergraduate TESL students should be refined following the acquisition order of prepositions that have been found in this research (+Lexical prepositions > - Lexical Prepositions). In this case, many activities can be introduced by English teachers and reviewers of English language curricula and syllabi by utilizing this found acquisition order in this research. Following this acquisition order, teaching and learning English prepositions will be increasingly facilitated.

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