Section 21  prepositions

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language notes

Prepositions are somewhere between vocabulary and grammar. Like other kinds of word, a preposition can have different uses which may not have very much in common. And as with other words, different uses of a preposition may have different equivalents in another language, making it hard for students to choose the right one:

*Can you bring my bike back until four o’clock?
*We’re going to Scotland on Christmas.

It is particularly difficult for students to know which preposition to use after a particular noun, verb or adjective:

*What was the reason of the delay?
*We arrive to Birmingham at 18.45.
*That’s typical for you.

or before a particular noun:

*I love walking under the rain.
*I don’t understand the exercise in page 6.

These combinations are often best treated as vocabulary – fixed expressions that have to be learnt one by one.

Not all students’ languages have prepositions – they may express the same ideas in other ways, for example by word endings. This may cause some students to leave them out.

*I lay down the sofa and went to sleep.

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of certain prepositions can be difficult for some students to hear. The CD-ROM exercises will help with this

possible further activities

The illustration can just be treated as a small piece of introductory reading. Alternatively, you could ask students how many titles of books, films or songs they can think of with prepositions in.

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language notes

This little group of prepositional uses can be quite confusing for beginners:

*on Christmas  *at Monday  *in Tuesday afternoon

possible further activities

**Personalisation**  Ask students to write or say sentences about when they work best – in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening or at night. They can also talk about what they like to do in the evenings, at weekends, in the summer etc.

**Meeting up**  Tell students to decide (without saying anything) that they will be at a particular café (for instance) at a certain time in the morning, afternoon or evening, on a certain day. (For example: at ten o’clock in the morning on Friday.) Then they walk round telling other students when they will be there (with all the prepositions!), and trying to find somebody else who will be there at the same time on the same day.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.  ➔ Section 21 continues
language notes

The English distinction between until (for continued activity) and by (for the time limit for an action) may not be matched in students' languages:

*Tell me until tomorrow at the latest.

possible further activities

Guessing the future  Ask students to complete the following sentences:
This government will stay in power until … at the latest.
We'll have a new government by ….

Personalisation  Ask students to write sentences saying how long they did something yesterday, or at some time in the past, using from … to.
‘I practised the piano from 9 to 10.’
‘I was at university from 2007 to 2010.’

language notes

Students' languages may use the same word for during and for:

*I waited during three hours.

German-speaking beginners may misuse while (German weil = ‘because').

*I ran while I was late.

possible further activities

Personalisation: extending Exercise 3  Ask students to give estimated (or real) answers to some or all of the following questions, using for.
How long can you hold your breath?
How long can you run without stopping?
How long can you go without sleep?
How long can you stand on one leg?
How long can you sing one note?
How long can you keep your eyes open without blinking?

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language notes

Students' languages may divide up space relations very differently from English, leading to problems with the use of these three prepositions:

*There's a beautiful picture at the wall.
*I left my keys on the door.
The difference between at and in, in particular, may take some time to grasp.

possible further activities

‘In’ or ‘on’: vocabulary expansion  Get students to think of five or more things where on would be appropriate (e.g. the floor, a pavement, a counter), and five or more where in would be appropriate (e.g. a bowl, a cupboard, a hospital ward). Teach the new vocabulary as necessary.

Journeys  Ask students to write short descriptions of journeys they have made, using at where possible (e.g. changed at, stopped for lunch at, stayed overnight at, arrived at).

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language notes
Some students may think that *in front of* means ‘facing’ or ‘opposite’. The exact differences between the expressions are not simple, but at this level students just need to understand that *in front of* is not used for situations like that of the bus stop and the house in the illustration.

possible further activities

Relative positions: extending Exercise 3  Get students to go and look at a street with plenty of shops etc, and to write a few sentences about it using as many place prepositions as possible.

‘There is a bank opposite a supermarket.’
‘There is a travel agent between two restaurants.’

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language notes
English likes to express the type of movement in the verb, putting the direction into a prepositional phrase: ‘She danced into the room’. Some languages put the direction in the verb, expressing the type of movement in a following participle: like ‘She entered the room dancing’. These languages may have fewer prepositions of movement, so their speakers may take time to learn to use, for example, *up, down, into, out of.*

The difference between *at* and *to* may not be matched in students’ languages:

*We went at the cinema last night.*

And students often treat *arrive* as a verb of movement:

*What time did you arrive to the station?*

possible further activities

Directions  Tell students to write detailed directions for getting from one place to another (perhaps in groups), using as many of the prepositions from the lesson as possible.