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 verb, noun or adjective:

*We arrive to Birmingham at 18.45.
*What was the reason of the delay?
*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. And note that some prepositions, for example at and for, have two quite different pronunciations (‘weak’ and ‘strong’) depending on whether they are stressed or not. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with these problems.

language notes

Most intermediate students will be familiar by now with the most common prepositional phrases relating to time. However, some students may still have occasional problems with this little group of prepositional uses.

*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 saying 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.
language notes

Students’ languages may divide up space relations very differently from English, leading to problems with the use of at, in and on:

*There’s a beautiful picture at the wall.
*I left my keys on the door.

The differences between at and in, in particular, are not always easy to define (but in the more difficult cases, they do not usually matter very much).

Where movement is concerned, 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 that 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

Vocabulary expansion: ‘in’ or ‘on’:

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).

Directions

Tell students to write detailed directions for getting from one place to another (perhaps in groups), using as many of the prepositions from Exercise 4 as possible.

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.

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 in the illustration.

The difference between between and among is often wrongly explained in grammars. Between is used for a position relative not just to two other things, but to two, three or more things if they are clearly distinct and separated (as explained in Exercise 5, and shown in diagrams 1, 2 and 3 in Exercise 6). Among is used when something is surrounded by, or part of, a more indistinct collection or mass of things. Among can also mean something like ‘one of’ or ‘some of’: Among my friends are several excellent musicians.

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

*I waited during three hours.
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 …

Relative positions  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.

Personalisation  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

Prepositional verbs like look at or listen to may correspond to one-word verbs in students’
mother tongues, and this may lead to occasional mistakes:
*Listen me!  *Look at! It’s snowing!
The opposite may also be true:
*We need to discuss about plans for next weekend.

Some students use the prepositional verbs happen and belong as if they were adjectives:
*What’s happen to Joe?  *It’s belong (to) me.

possible further activities

Consolidation  When students have worked through the lesson, say a selection of the verbs
and ask students to say what follows. Like this:
‘laugh’ – ‘at’
‘operate’ – ‘on’
‘wait’ – ‘for’
‘depend’ – ‘on’
‘marry’ – ‘no preposition’

Mime  Individually or in groups, students mime actions referred to by prepositional verbs
in the lesson:
looking at something
listening to something
thinking about something
talking to somebody
waiting for somebody/something
The actions must be reasonably easy to guess (e.g. waiting for a bus, but not waiting for the
end of the world). The other students say what is being mimed. (‘You’re looking at a poster.’
‘You’re operating on a patient.’)

Travel  Get students to write a few sentences about a journey they have made, using some
expressions with prepositions (e.g. wait for, get on/off, …).

Internet  Ask students to look for interesting examples of some of these verb + preposition
combinations on the internet.
possible further activities

Consolidation  When students have worked through the lesson, say a selection of the nouns and ask students to say what follows. Like this:
‘lack’ – ‘of’
‘congratulations’ – ‘on’
‘reason’ – ‘for’

Internet  Ask students to look for interesting examples of some of these noun + preposition combinations on the internet.

possible further activities

Consolidation  When students have worked through the lesson, say a selection of the adjectives and ask students to say what follows. Like this:
‘full’ – ‘of’
‘bored’ – ‘with’
‘clever’ – ‘at’

Internet  Ask students to look for interesting examples of some of these adjective + preposition combinations on the internet.

possible further activities

Acting  Some of these expressions could be acted or mimed by pairs or groups, with the other students trying to decide on the expression (e.g. at a party, in the rain, in time).

Internet  Ask students to look for interesting examples of some of these adjective + preposition combinations on the internet.