



A cognitive linguistic study of the English prepositions above, on, and over

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Abstract

The current study analyzes three locative English prepositions, above, on, and over from a cognitive semantic point of view. Since English is a foreign language for Iraqi students, these prepositions pose a problem for Iraqi university students. The complexity of these three prepositions inspires the researcher to use the Cognitive Linguistic (CL) approach and insights as developed by Tyler and Evans (2003) to test their validity and help Iraqi students. Data analysis is quantitatively based. Sixty second-year undergraduate students participate in this pilot study. The pre-and post-test data are analyzed via SPSS statistical editor, and the results show a progression of more than (0.05). The survey results have revealed a marked encouraging transformation in the students' attitude to CL approach and presented the core basis of difficulty associated with bewilderment in using these prepositions. The results of this experiment proved the effectiveness of CL approach. It is effective in obtaining an accurate understanding of English prepositions above, on, and over.

Keywords: Cognitive semantic; Cognitive linguistics; English prepositions; locative prepositions; Iraqi students

1. Introduction

Since Iraqi students are foreign learners of English, they face the same difficulties as foreign language learners of English in understanding the multiple meanings of prepositions in English. The two English Linguists Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) have perceived this problem before, and teachers of English have long faced it, finding that acquiring prepositions, in general, is a foremost challenge for EFL learners. Saed and Yassin (2017) mentioned that sometimes people in the Arab world use English expressions lacking prepositions; for example, some people say *discuss*” not “*to discuss*”, or “*to marry*” not “*to marry with*”. Iraqi researchers take into consideration the English prepositions polysemy. They conducted many studies to explain the perplexing meaning of the English prepositions; for example, Aajami (2019) conducted a cognitive study on the English preposition “*in*”, she also led two other studies on the preposition “*at*” in (Aajami, 2018a), and similarly she tackled a study on the two locative English prepositions *behind* and *beyond* (Aajami, 2018b). Moreover, Al-Baharani and Al-Robuye (2016) studied the English preposition semantics of “*at*”.

The cognitive linguistic approach not only can analyze the prepositions in the English language; but also, in other languages. According to the cognitive linguistic approach, there are three aspects in

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which prepositions can be identified. These aspects are: clarifying the abstract notion of prepositions, representing their functional elements, and offering a schematic representation to prepositions based on a special configuration between two entities or more. CL insights have also been adopted in analyzing prepositions above, on, over in the English language. Thus, this study aims to estimate the efficiency of CL approach in understanding these English prepositions accurately and systematically (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

The study aims to examine the effectiveness of CL approach in increasing participants' capacity to understand the English prepositions semantics of above, on, and over in their speech contexts. The study was limited to second-year students in the Department of English- College of Education for Women- University of Baghdad/ Iraq. It was conducted during the academic year 2020/2021. Sixty participants were randomly selected to answer a questionnaire prepared to meet the purpose of the study. The test was done remotely due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

1.1. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research question:

1. What is the role of CL in increasing participants' capacity to understand the semantics of the English prepositions above, on, and over in their speech contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An Overview of the Cognitive Linguistic Approach

This part focuses on CL theory and its useful applications in determining the semantics of prepositions for learners of English as a foreign language. In the 1980s, Lakoff, Langacker, and Talmey found the Cognitive linguistics. CL is an approach that focuses on natural language analysis; it also concentrates on language as an instrument for organizing, processing and conveying information. Three basic properties of cognitive linguistics can be resultant: the primacy of semantics in linguistic analysis, the encyclopedic nature of linguistic meaning, and the perspective nature of the linguistic meaning. There are various conceptual phenomena that cognitive linguistics recognizes as basic concepts: prototype, metaphor, metonymy, personification, perspective, mental spaces, and the like. Each constitutes a specific principle of conceptual organization, as it is reflected in language (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2012).

CL theory is a reflection of the general aspects of cognition, here's a brief definition, and proponents of this theory argue that it is best to study language in the context of its use. Meaning and form are inseparable in the study of language, as CL theory states. There are two main fields that it focuses on: CL, the field of grammar, which is concerned with the study of the organization of language, and the field of semantics, which is the study of the conceptual structure of language (Evans, 2012). Our experience of the world and the way we perceive and understand it is the method adapted by the CL approach (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001).

Polysemous English prepositions are difficult to understand, so it is difficult to understand and contain their meanings. More than that, prepositions are one of the most frequent lexical items in the English language and have an intricate system of usages. Consequently, EFL students in Iraq suffer from the same challenge as ESL learners in understanding the divergent meanings of English prepositions (Celce-Murica & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Therefore, the CL approach is adopted to address this problem and analyze English prepositions. CL relies on spatial scenes, relationships and figurative senses, semantic to simplify the prepositions' networks (Mueller, 2016).

Tyler, Mueller, and Ho (2011) found the locative English prepositions can create spatial relations among a landmark and a trajector. The different meanings related to English prepositions can be characterized as being systematically linked within a motivating semantic system. The central idea of a spatial landscape creates conceptual relationships between two entities, spatial experience, and interaction. For instance:

“He held an umbrella over his head when it started raining.”

The spatial scene in this example means that there is a contact between the speaker and the umbrella. This motivates another scene which is described as “the rain is falling over the umbrella”. These relations are important because without the speaker, the umbrella will not stand over his head, and without the umbrella, the rain will fall on the speaker. The spatial scene contains a provision relation between “the speaker & the umbrella” and “the umbrella & the rain” (Tyler et al., 2011). The human communication interaction to the scene of “He held an umbrella over his head when it started raining” varies according to the viewer's focal attention. Someone may focus on the relation between the man and the umbrella while someone else may think of the relation between the umbrella and the rain to check its validity in preventing the rain from reaching the man. Thus, vantage points are not identical. The way the viewer perceives the physical view of the spatial scene can determine the meaning in which he/ she will understand it due to his/ her perception (Tyler and Evans, 2003).

Different spatial relations can extend in a systematic way in each central scene. The contact relations that are described by prepositions can grow interchanged senses (Boers, 1996). For example:

1. “*the ball is on the table*” → “*the light is above the table*”.

This is what is called the spatial relations. A spatial scene can develop a figurative sense. Despite the fact that the “ball on the table” represents a spatial formation of entities, it also refers to the figurative meaning that the first entity (ball) is above and another entity (table) is below (Boers & Demecheleer, 1998).

2.2. Related Studies

Many studies in the literature review addressed the cognitive semantic aspects of the English prepositions addressed in this research. Nasser (2020) conducted a descriptive quantitative study to test the English preposition via the cognitive linguistic approach. She tried to help Iraqi EFL to mitigate the problems that encounter the Iraqi English Foreign Learners (EFL) in differentiating between using prepositions correctly especially ON. It highlights the causes of those problems. Correct handling proposition is not because most of them have different functions straightforward, and different prepositions have the same uses. The results showed different usages of ON and different areas of meanings. It also proved the effectiveness of the cognitive linguistic approach.

Okuno (2014) planned a cognitive-linguistic analysis of the English preposition ON. This research aimed to conduct a comprehensive cognitive linguistic analysis of the English preposition ON. The results gave a cognitive linguistic account of the English preposition ON systematically and comprehensively. The analysis is systematic because the seemingly dissimilar senses are made to follow one simple, basic meaning. This analysis is comprehensive; it covers the full range of senses that are displayed by ON. Some senses are completely beyond the analysis, thus the researcher does not address them, such as “An article on sports” and a lecture on the economic situation in the world”.

Horiuchi (2017) studied the differences of usage between “on” and “over”. He attempted to make it clear how these two prepositions are dissimilar from each other, and how the speaker or writer selects between these prepositions in using language. This research tries to express how the differences of these prepositions are driven or correlated to spatial meanings or in other words the 'original' or 'initial'

of 'on' and 'over', which are the mechanisms of these terminologies. Besides, this study also argued that the variances are not entirely motivated from the meanings of 'on' and 'over', but are traditionally related to larger units as the combinations of influences of 'on' and 'over'.

Mori (2019) conducted a study to analyze the semantics of the English preposition "Over". The researcher used the cognitive linguistic approach and its insights to accomplish the objectives of the research. Mori discussed the different senses of the English preposition "over". Mori argued that the image schema of over is organized in 3D image, and that the form and size of the Trajectory and Land Mark are topologically expandable and reducible. Mori found that the preposition above contains a list of distinct senses. The results showed that there is an alternate analysis of a widely studied phenomenon which makes it possible to improve and simplify the cognitive linguistic analysis of the preposition "over". Image schemas for TRs, LMs, are three-dimensional, structured, and topological and their presence is critical to this simplification, and enhances people's knowledge and understanding of linguistic behavior in important ways. They also contributed to identifying and characterizing the semantics of spatial language, particularly prepositions.

Roussel (2012) conducted cognitive-linguistic research of the English preposition "over". The purpose of the study was to further inspect the issue of perceptual computation to approve its relationship to the theoretical and 'temporal' principles of the preposition 'over'. The results of the study showed that "over" conveys the perception of the ego and the evaluation of their environments (space) or worries (object, time). Over does not appear to transport different degrees of metrics, places, positions, elevations, paths or comments about A's and B's references in A over B, as a subjective commentary both thematically and temporally. The judgment in question is serious to the cause-and-effect relationship or the so-called objective level. It focuses on how long its specificity, i.e. segmentation, is meaningful or the so-called temporal level. Since the space-time coordinates of the ego are specified, the question is whether the recipient, who will submit to his own coordinates, will successfully interpret the value assigned to the preposition by the ego. This is where context linguistically comes in. In fact, the position principle is determined by the various side values that will direct the addressee, which one finds in the verb units telic or atelic, the noun phrases denoting completion in waiting, or the many time periods (both retrospective and future) involved.

Horiuchi (2017) conducted a study on English prepositions as an interface between embodied cognition and dynamic use. Horiuchi's study aimed to analyze the natural use of implicit prepositions in discourse contexts, and to show how dynamic factors in natural discourse can interact with cognitive processes in determining the behavior of each preposition. These results include verbs that express spatial relationships, such as rise, rose, and towering, which usually occur with the above to express spatial meanings and these relationships cannot occur without the multiple meanings of the preposition. The formal written text has characteristics for both the readers and writers of the text, which reflect and motivate the asymmetric behavior of "above" and "below". This study exposes through analysis a collaborative aspect of written discourse, which means more interaction between the writer and readers. This concerns the interaction between semantics and pragmatism, as well as between perception and discourse.

2.3. *The Semantic Analysis of above, on, and over*

The main idea of this part is to show how the analysis of cognitive linguistic can support one's thinking about some comprehension difficulties. The analysis is going to address the areas in which the three intended prepositions intersect in this study. In other words, the research will differentiate between similar uses of the targeted prepositions in this research. For example, if one uses the following example:

3. *the ball is on the tree; the ball is above the tree; or the ball is over tree.*

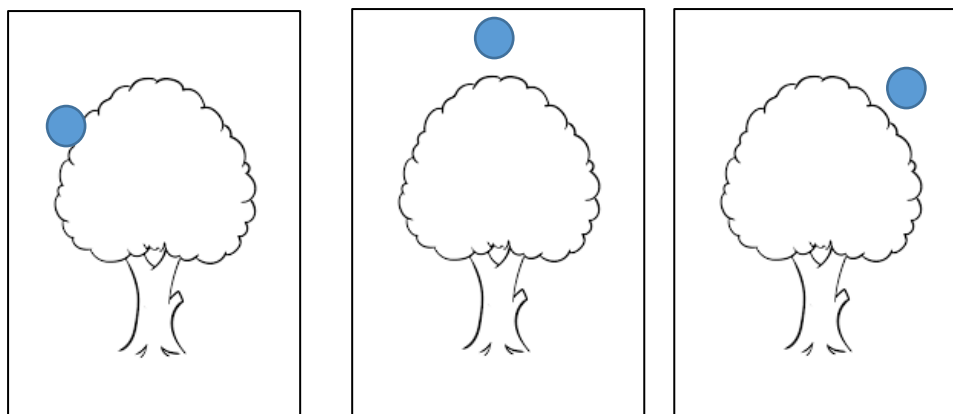


Figure 1. The ball is on the tree. **Figure 2.** The ball is over the tree. **Figure 3.** The ball above the tree

In the figure (1) the relation between the tree and the ball is very close. There is a physical touch between the two objects. The special sense in this example shows a kind of dependence from the ball toward the tree. The tree gives a kind of support to the second entity. The ball is on the tree gives a kind of duration. Maybe the ball will stay on the tree for hours or days. As for figure (2), the second entity, the ball, is directly upwards the first entity, the tree. Similar to figure one, over also gives a special sense that one entity down and the other is above. Over means one entity upwards the another regardless if there is a physical connection between the two entities or not while the preposition on implies a physical suggestion. Regarding figure (3) above indicates that the ball in someplace over the tree. It refers to a rank or a position, and it also create a sense of special sense between two entities.



Figure 4. Is taken from Google image

In figure (4) one can use both *above* and *over*, but one cannot use *on*. First, in the example, *the clouds moved over the mountain*, *over* create a special sense between two entities the first of which is static while the second is moving. *Over* in this place gives a sense of movement. Second, *the clouds lingered above the mountain*, *above* connects between two motionless entities. Above specifies the places of entities while *over* represents their state. *On* cannot be used to describe any relation between these two entities. Depending on figure (4), It is possible to use the example:

4. *The snow is on/over the mountain.*

Here, both of them, *over* and *on* can be used, since they create a special sense that one entity covers the another. In on case, the relation stimulates that one entity hides the other one. Further, the snow

needs support from the mountain because without the mountains there will be no snow. *Over* generates a sense of controlling. One entity dominates another, the snow controls the top of the mountain. In terms of directions, the three prepositions give a sense of specifying directions. The central sense for *on* and *above* is always upwards while *over* has many directions.

On can be used in different positions depending on its sense and the relations that it can create between entities. It is used in time expression to specify days; for example, *I see my grandmother on Fridays* (Beare, 2019). The relations between these two entities are repetitive on specific time. It can be drawn as this:



Figure 5. The Google image for “I see my grandmother on Fridays”

The direction in figure (5) is repetitive on time. It is an abstract notion that it starts in the past and goes to the future. In the example,

5. *Jan goes shopping on foot,*

This means that Jan depends on her foot to go shopping. One entity depends on part of it or on another entity. The direction is like this ↓: It contradicts the direction in the example ↑:

6. *The ball is on the box.*

As for *Above*, it has a central direction which can be represented as ↑. *Above* represents an abstract notion of the direction upwards; for example,

7. *Loy will choose a friendship above love.*

Thus, above can represent physical and abstract notions in directions. It ranks one entity upwards another; for instance,

8. *There is a plane hovering over the mall.*

The special sense that is created by *above* represents the first entity, the plane, upwards another entity, the mall. The mall is the land mark that specifies the position of the first entity, the plane.

Over has many senses and different directions. For example,

9. *John held an umbrella over his head.*

In this sentence *over* represents special sense between two entities; the second one, umbrella, protects the first, John, and the first entity supports the second. The direction can be described as this ↑. *Over* has a horizontal direction an →:

10. “*Look at the train over there*”!

The direction can be represented as this. Circulation is also one of the senses of *over* as in:

11. “*stop talking over this problem*”.


The special relation here is in the mind of the one who is always talking about the same problem. Thus, the direction here can be expressed as in figure (6):



Figure 6. The Google image on the circulation representation over

Over can describe the motion of one entity upwards another one, as in:

12. “*The cat jumps over the box*”.

This movement can be drawn as . It also can give the sense of all directions at the same time as in the example:

13. “*The milk split over the table*”. Here, over creates a special sense of two entities; one of them works as a land mark and the other as a trajectory. The directions of milk over the table can be as in figure (7).

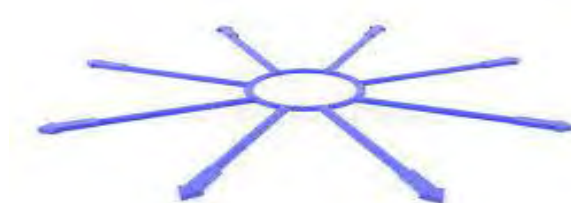


Figure 7. The Google image representing the land mark and trajectory sense of Over

Over represents the downward movement as in:

14. “*The bird fell over the car*”.

The relation between these two entities is depicted as there is a clash between the entities.

3. Experiment Study

The research heads to enhance the awareness of Iraqi students about CL and develop their understanding and capacity to interpret and comprehend English prepositions. A number of sixty-two students have participated in this research as an experimental group. The researcher tested the learners' knowledge of CL approach via illustrating the prepositions by testing objects that include photos and graphics. The learners' knowledges, thoughts, and attitudes towards CL approach have been tested via a questionnaire that was distributed before conducting the experiment. The researcher distributed an online survey for the participants also before starting the experiment to check the eligibility of

participants such as they can participate via online or face-to-face, and to check their readiness psychologically and logically, they have the necessary tools for remote education. In order to reach the goal of the research, the researcher designed the experiment in three stages:

- 1) Explaining the standards and insights of the CL approach, such as: the spatial scene, spatial relations, figurative sense, and a metaphorical language via videos and PowerPoint slides.
- 2) Conducting a practical training to identify the special sense and relations that are created via adopting the targeted prepositions *above*, *on*, and *over*. Here, the participants act the meaning and differences among these prepositions in real-life scenes; and
- 3) Making a comparison on the part of the participants regarding the differences and similarities of these prepositions in different examples to get a deep understanding and a clear comprehension of their cognitive linguistics dimensions. At this time, the researcher asked the participants to analyze and reproduce sentences with *Above*, *on*, and *over* to understand the motion, special relations, and directions. The researcher collected and analyzed data through a quantitative approach. The collected data, pre- and post-test participants' scores, were analysed via statistical editor; Paired sample statistics SPSS.

3.1 Procedures and Participants

The number of participants is sixty-two students in the second year, most of whom have an intermediate level in English. They have not been introduced to CL approach before, nor have they checked the polysemy of English prepositions. The procedures have been carried out as described below:

- 1) The first step: A brief introduction to CL theory, including the definition of the theory, its principles, and insights into the approach presented to students;
- 2) In the second step, a preliminary test is conducted; it contains different sets of questions: a set of photos to be scrutinized, a set of expressions to be paraphrased, and the filling the blanks with the appropriate preposition. This initial test aims to test the participants' method in dealing with English prepositions in terms of function and multi-meanings. Later, participants discover the main difference between what they can do before and after diving into CL theory;
- 3) The third step, started next the contributors have conducted the experiment and delved into the core of the theory through analyzing and linking the components surrounding the target prepositions, the spatial relationships that prepositions create, and examining the way they differ from one preposition to another, and the different meanings these relationships create, participants conducted the post-test that includes the same sets of questions in the preliminary test. The research continues in order to track the change in participants' awareness as they continue deeper into the experiment;
- 4) In the final step, Participants conducted a three-question survey to check the level to which their attitudes toward understanding prepositions and their relationships changed in light of the CL approach.

3.2 Pre-test

The researcher collected sixty-two pre-test scores that revealed the students' abilities in interpreting and analyzing the semantics of *above*, *on*, and *over*. As long as the participants had no knowledge about the cognitive linguistic approach, their abilities to analyze prepositions were based on their cumulative information of English. They offered a simple superficial analysis of *above*, *on*, and *over* polysemous meanings. Only, the central meaning of these prepositions was tackled upon. Their scores and analysis were apparent evidence that those participants encountered unusual struggle in evolving

the metaphorical meaning of these prepositions; (See Appendix A for further information about the questions style of both tests).

The pre-test result has shown that all the students had little idea of CL approach and views after taking the pre-test from the experiment. Apparently, all participants, 100%, cannot distinguish between figurative or spatial senses. In addition, many of them relied on their earlier information during paraphrasing the expressions or analyzing the pictures. They could not highlight the relationships between the entities surrounding the prepositions. Approximately, one-third of the participants got the correct answers regarding the multiple-choice to complete the sentences. It appears to the researcher that the random selection enabled them to obtain this degree, and the reason is that they succeeded in some examples and failed in other similar examples. The results of this test represented an important incentive for the researcher to work on the adopted methodology to be clearer and more effective when illustrating the meaning and use of the CL approach.

3.3 Post-test

Subsequently, the investigator began to apply the experiment in detail in a period of 10-week that included lectures, workshops, games and tests. The researcher held three sessions every week, and each session lasted for two to three hours. During the session, the method varied between theoretical and practical or representative application. 10 weeks were enough to cover the theory and its insights clearly for the contributors to become familiar with the adapted approach, CL approach. The investigator, during the meetings, used videos and clarified CL approach depending on Tyler and Evans 2003 experiment. The researcher relied on graphics to better show the prepositions' meaning. As soon as the explanation of the theoretical segment was completed, the researcher divided the participants into groups to study the theory and to apply it in practice. Similarly, students relied on samples, photos, and graphs to explain the use of the target prepositions. The workshops conducted by the participants were very useful, where they identify and analyze spatial scenes and highlighted the spatial relationships included in the sentences and pictures. They used a realistic thimble to represent some examples. Students paraphrase the sentences containing the target prepositions. After this time, Participants had a good and clear idea of the CL approach and were trained to develop a physical view of spatial relationships and structures.

The post-test contained a set of problems such as pictures to be analyzed, paraphrasing of sentences, and blanks to be completed just like what was done in the preliminary exam (see Appendix A). The researcher developed an evaluation form to collect the participants' scores. The scores were collected for sixty-two participants in the experiment. First, the outcomes of the post-test were verified in contrast with that of the pre-test. After the comparison, the results showed that the participants developed a vibrant awareness of CL approach. All participants could identify the scenes and spatial relationships in the examples used in the test. This shows that their response to the step has been completed successfully and culminated in a good understanding. Furthermore, a significant portion of the participants showed a significant development in distinguishing the figurative use questions with prepositions. Also, almost 95% of the participants chose the correct answer by filling in the blanks with the appropriate preposition.

The table below shows the participants performance in the both tests

T-Test [DataSet0]

Table 1. shows the change in both tests

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	12.08	62	2.444	.292
	Post-test	16.36	62	1.901	.227

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre-test & post-test	62	-.493	.261

The SPSS analysis chart displays a set of important data, namely the number of participants, the results of the tests and the change between them, the difference in scores. The number of participants was sixty-two students, and their average in the preliminary test was 12.08, while the post-test was 16.36. The results show that the participants scored 4.28. The difference between the two means in both tests indicates a progression of more than (0.05). Because the results of this research are in agreement with those conducted by Tyler and Evans (2003), therefore, this study is valid. From the above it is clear that the CL approach can create a significant positive change in students' understanding of English prepositions.

The participants repeated the survey to show the extent of the difference in their views and attitudes towards the cognitive linguistic approach theory. The change revealed by the survey results represents a short journey between simple and profound knowledge that humans experience in their cumulative journey. The participants' mental perception changed after the experiment, and they acquired valuable information on cognitive linguistics. Also, they had a innovative vision into the semantics of English prepositions above, on, over; consider Figures 8&9.

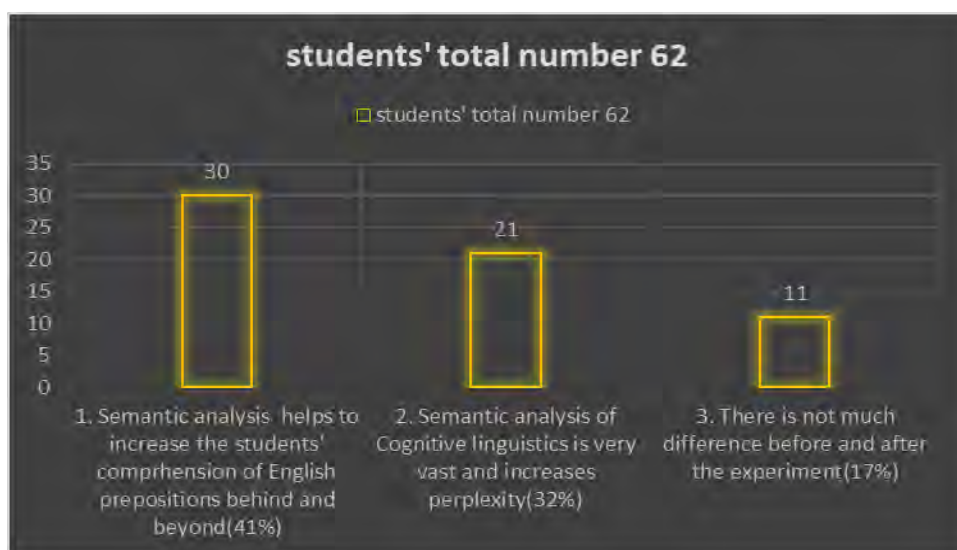


Figure 8. The results of the survey before the experiment

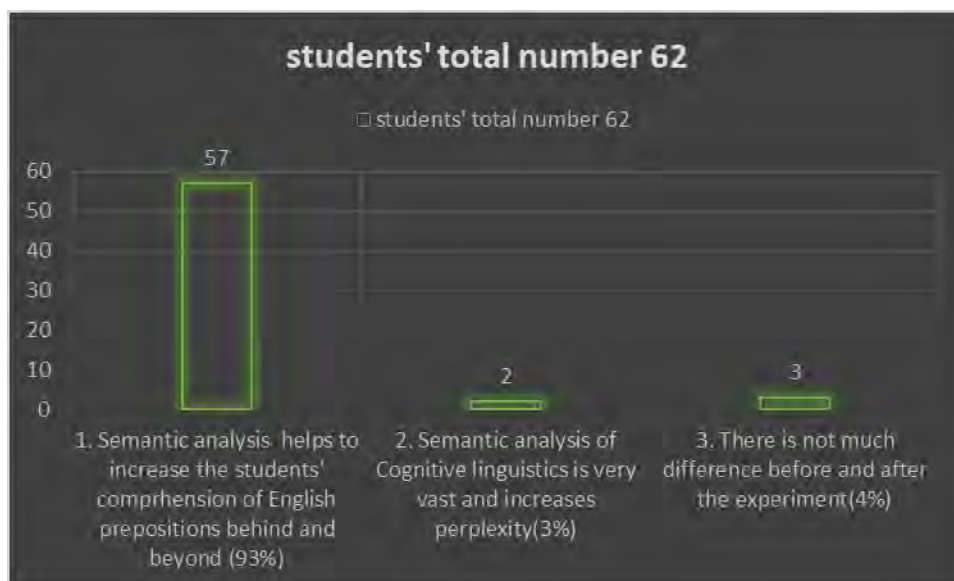


Figure 9. The survey's results after the experiment

The survey has shown that 87% of the participants representing fifty-seven of the total sixty-two participants believe that CL approach can help to improve their understanding of the English preposition above, on, and over. Also, 3%, which is 2 participants of the total number, found CL approach to be problematic and vague. Furthermore, 4%, representing 3 participants, do not discover a significant change in finding out an understanding of above, on, and over in light of CL approach. The outcomes of the survey assure an encouraging modification in the attitude of students towards the use of the cognitive linguistics approach when treating English prepositions.

3.4 Findings and Results

This research supports participants' perceptions of how to deal with positional prepositions in the English language, especially On, Above, and Over. By understanding the location of these prepositions in context, participants gain new concepts when analyzing prepositions and determining what they mean or refer to. Participants' comprehension has been developed not only due to cognitively comprehending the prepositions, but also to the classification of objects in real life. All results have shown a significant development in students' performance and attitude towards CL approach.

4. Conclusions

This research investigates the efficacy of CL approach in acquiring the semantics of the English prepositions. Depending on the obtained results from the both tests and the survey, it has been quite clear that the participants have made an important progress in accessing the semantics of the targeted English prepositions. The recommendations of this research are: Foremost, the application of CL approach is a necessity not only to improve the acquisition of English prepositions in the classroom, but also to increase students' general awareness in understanding and perceiving spatial relationships. Second, the inclusion of cognitive theories must be pursued at higher levels of study, particularly at the undergraduate level.

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Appendix A

Name:

Date:

Kindly fill the gaps with one of these preposition (Above, On, or Over)

1. There is a nameplate the door.
2. She is getting her disease.
3. A warm hand rested her waist.
4. I'll get supper..... the table.
5. A free medical facility is provided to the persons aged 50 or
6. Can you jump the drain?
7. "Alex tells me you have some nice horsesyour ranch," Carmen said to Señor Medena.
8. People top of the earth are all meat.
9. The alarm rang for five minutes.
10. His height is average.

Please, investigate and classify the relationships among the objects in the following photos using one of the two locative English prepositions *Above, On* or *Over*.

1.



2.



3.



Please, rephrase the following sentences focusing on clarifying the meanings of the prepositions above, on, and over (you are free to express the meaning according to your understanding of the CL approach).

1. She feels a warm hand touch her back.
2. You can speak to the officer above.
3. Why are you laughing *over* a silly joke?
4. We got the instructions from above.
5. The education minister is coming today to look *over* the school.
6. The teachers always favor Joe *above* other students.
7. My friend is on the way to Moscow.
8. We will discuss this matter *over* dinner.
9. The photo hangs on the wall.