

Preposition Proficiency Among Grade 3 Learners: A Descriptive-Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive-analytical study analyzed the level of preposition proficiency among Grade 3 learners at the Montessori Grade School Department of the University of Saint Anthony during the Academic Year 2025–2026. It examined learners' ability to identify, classify, and correctly use prepositions, determined their common errors, and evaluated a proposed intervention material to improve proficiency. Using total enumeration sampling, all Grade 3 learners across six sections (Amethyst, Beryl, Coral, Diamond, Emerald, and Jade) served as respondents. Data were gathered through a validated researcher-made test, a semi-structured interview guide for teachers, and a classroom observation checklist, and were analyzed using mean, frequency and percentage distribution, and weighted mean with a five-point Likert scale. Findings revealed that learners demonstrated a high level of proficiency in identifying and classifying prepositions, particularly prepositions of place ($M = 4.30$), while their ability to apply prepositions correctly in oral and written communication was only moderate ($M = 3.55$). Correspondingly, learners committed a very high level of errors in prepositions of time ($M = 4.32$) and place ($M = 4.33$), indicating a gap between conceptual understanding and practical application. These difficulties were attributed to confusion in contextual usage and limited exposure to meaningful language practice. Learners perceived visual aids and practice-based activities, integrated in a proposed material called *Preposition Playground*, as highly effective (composite $M = 4.00$) in improving their understanding. The study concludes that while Grade 3 learners possess foundational, rule-based knowledge of prepositions, more contextualized, interactive, and learner-centered instruction is needed to close the gap between knowledge and use. Teachers are recommended to implement engaging, context-based activities, provide continuous guided practice, and utilize visual instructional materials to strengthen learners' preposition proficiency.

Keywords: preposition proficiency, Grade 3 learners, descriptive-analytical research, grammar instruction, Dual Coding Theory, Skill Acquisition Model, Concrete Operational Stage

INTRODUCTION

Prepositions are crucial in fostering the foundational language skills of learners, as they facilitate the expression of relationships among words, ideas, and actions. At the Grade 3 level, achieving mastery of prepositions is vital since it enhances reading comprehension, writing clarity, and overall communication skills that become increasingly intricate in higher grades. Gaining insight into how young learners utilize and apply prepositions offers valuable information regarding their linguistic development and preparedness for more advanced language tasks.

This study analyzed the preposition proficiency of Grade 3 learners at the Montessori Grade School Department of the University of Saint Anthony during the Academic Year 2025–2026. Its primary objective was to assess learners' ability to identify, classify, and correctly use basic prepositions—such as *in*, *on*, *at*, *under*, *behind*, *between*, *with*, *to*, and *from*—in oral and written contexts. Grounded in Piaget's Theory of Cognitive

Development, Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, and DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Model, the research sought to identify common error patterns and evaluate how developmental readiness influences preposition use. In the Philippines, grammar instruction, including the proper use of prepositions, is grounded in educational policies such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533), which mandates the cultivation of robust literacy skills through the K to 12 Curriculum. Similarly, the Department of Education's (DepEd) Curriculum Guide in English underscores grammar competency as a core learning standard for elementary students.

Despite these directives, learners in many schools continue to encounter difficulty with the correct usage of prepositions, which adversely affects their performance in reading and writing activities. Teachers report persistent errors in sentence formation, incorrect use of directional and positional prepositions, and confusion when interpreting written directives. Such difficulties indicate a need to assess the current proficiency levels of Grade 3 learners in order to inform instructional enhancements, design targeted interventions, and more effectively support learners' language development. This gap in the literature—specifically, the limited local, classroom-level evidence on how young Filipino learners use prepositions in authentic communication—is what this study responds to by analyzing learners' actual performance and pinpointing areas that require immediate pedagogical attention.

Although the University of Saint Anthony maintains high academic standards and offers structured English instruction, it remains necessary to ascertain whether learners are achieving the competencies outlined in the curriculum. By evaluating learners' comprehension and application of prepositions, the study aims to produce an accurate account of their current linguistic development and identify the areas in which they excel or face challenges, including how teaching methodologies, classroom activities, exposure to reading resources, and home literacy practices may shape their command of prepositions. Ultimately, the study is intended to inform language teaching practices at the University of Saint Anthony by providing evidence-based data on Grade 3 learners' proficiency, assisting educators and administrators in designing targeted interventions, improving lesson delivery, and strengthening grammar instruction where it is most needed.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to analyze the level of preposition proficiency among Grade 3 learners. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Determine the level of preposition proficiency of Grade 3 learners in terms of (a) identifying basic prepositions such as *in*, *on*, and *at*; (b) classifying prepositions according to type, including prepositions of time, place, and direction; and (c) using prepositions correctly in oral and written sentences;
2. Identify the common errors committed by Grade 3 learners in the use of prepositions; and
3. Evaluate proposed intervention materials to improve the preposition proficiency of Grade 3 learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three complementary theories. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development situates Grade 3 learners within the concrete operational stage, in which understanding is built through hands-on learning and concrete visual references, and this developmental readiness shapes learners' capacity to grasp spatial and temporal relationships expressed by prepositions. Paivio's Dual Coding Theory holds that learning is strengthened when verbal information (rules and text) is paired with visual information (pictures and diagrams), a principle that enhances learners' retention of preposition rules and their application. DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Model describes how declarative knowledge (identifying rules) develops into procedural knowledge (practice in context) and, with sufficient practice, into automaticity (fluent use)—the pathway toward the study's ultimate goal of preposition mastery. Figure 1 presents the interrelationship of these theories as applied to this study.

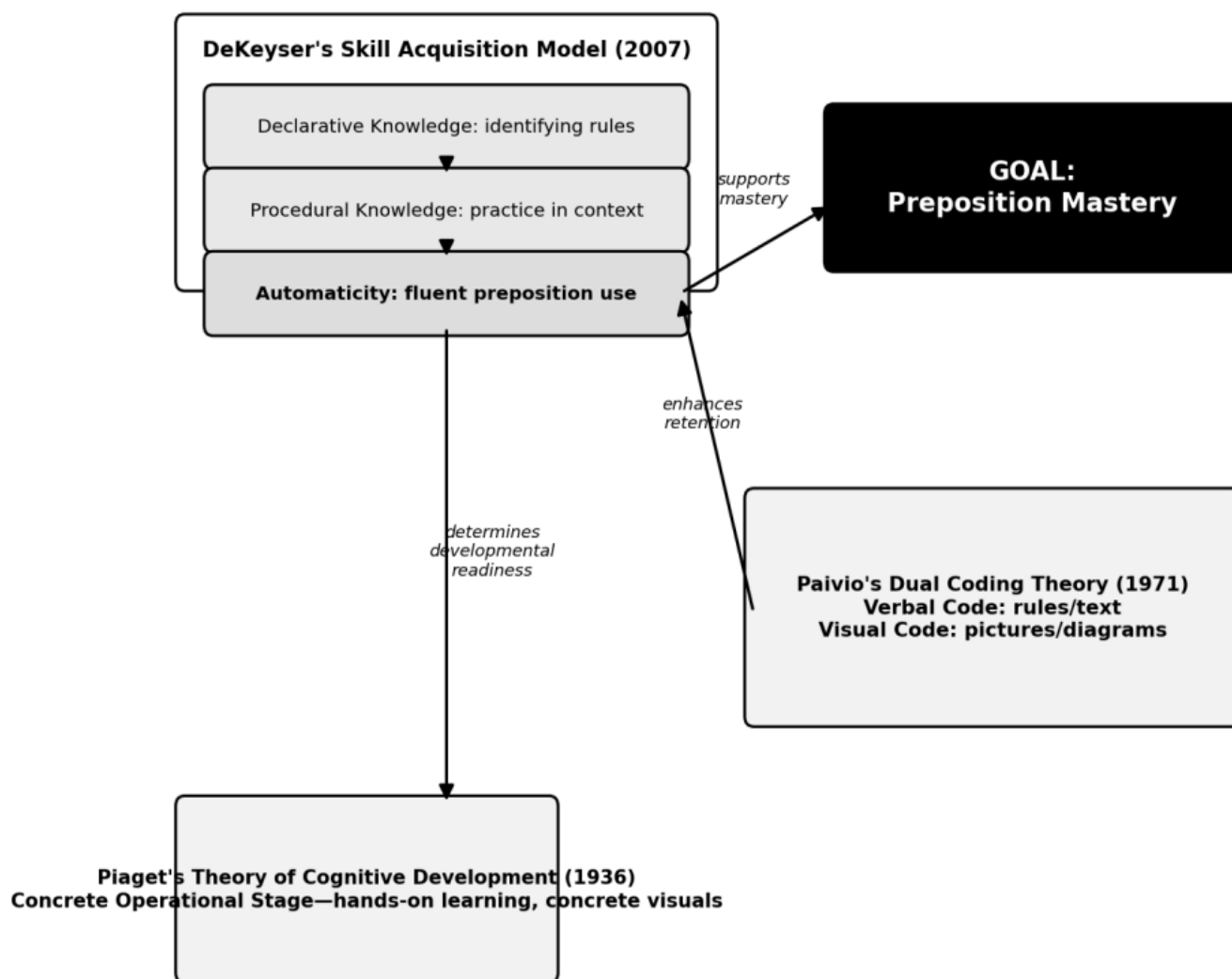


Figure 1. Theoretical Paradigm of the Study

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive-analytical research design, a hybrid approach that does not stop at describing what is happening but begins to bridge the gap toward why it is happening. It combines the data-gathering strengths of descriptive research with the initial interpretative steps of analytical research. Data were collected through a researcher-made test, an interview guide, and an observation checklist, then examined through statistical methods and expressed as figures, tables, and percentage distributions.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents were the Grade 3 learners enrolled in the Montessori Grade School Department of the University of Saint Anthony during the School Year 2025–2026—the developmental stage at which mastery of basic grammar skills, particularly prepositions, is expected under the prescribed curriculum standards. A total enumeration sampling technique was employed, wherein all Grade 3 learners were included as respondents rather than a sampled portion of the population. This approach was appropriate given the manageable and accessible population size, and it minimized sampling bias while ensuring a complete representation of learners' abilities in identifying, classifying, and using prepositions. Respondents came from six sections—Amethyst, Beryl, Coral, Diamond, Emerald, and Jade—allowing the study to capture and compare preposition proficiency across groups and to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings.

Research Instruments

Researcher-made test on prepositions. A 30-item researcher-made test served as the primary instrument for data collection, designed to measure learners' proficiency in identifying, classifying, and correctly using prepositions in sentences. Test items were based on the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) and aligned with the DepEd English Curriculum Guide. The test was divided into three parts: (a) identifying basic prepositions, (b) classifying prepositions into time, place, and direction, and (c) using prepositions correctly in sentences. The instrument was reviewed by Grade 3 English teachers to establish content validity and clarity, and revisions were made based on their recommendations.

Interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from English teachers, focusing on the common difficulties encountered by learners, the teaching strategies employed, and teachers' observations regarding learners' use of prepositions. This instrument provided deeper insight to support and explain the quantitative findings.

Observation checklist. An observation checklist was used during classroom activities to document learners' behavior, participation, and performance in tasks involving prepositions, focusing on indicators such as accuracy, engagement, and common errors. This instrument supplemented the test and interview data by providing real-time evidence of learners' skills in authentic classroom settings.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured permission from the school administration of the University of Saint Anthony before conducting the study. Upon approval, the researcher-made test on prepositions was prepared, validated by Grade 3 English teachers, and finalized for administration. The test was then administered to all Grade 3 learners during their regular English class schedule to ensure a natural learning environment, with clear instructions given beforehand to ensure understanding. After administration, all test papers were collected, checked, and scored systematically. Classroom observations were conducted using the observation checklist to record learners' participation, behavior, and common errors during activities involving prepositions, and a semi-structured interview with English teachers was carried out to gather supporting qualitative data on learners' difficulties and instructional practices. All collected data were then organized, tabulated, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Mean. The mean was used to determine the average performance of Grade 3 learners on the preposition proficiency test. According to Calmorin and Calmorin (2012), the mean is the most stable and reliable measure of central tendency, used to describe the typical performance of a group. It is computed as:

$$\bar{x} = \Sigma x / n$$

where $\bar{x}$ is the mean, Σx is the sum of all scores, and n is the number of learners.

Frequency and percentage distribution. Frequency and percentage were used to classify learners according to level of proficiency. According to David (2014), frequency refers to the number of times a value occurs, while percentage expresses frequency in relation to 100. Percentage was computed as:

$$\text{Percentage (\%)} = (f / N) \times 100$$

where f is the frequency of responses and N is the total number of learners.

Weighted mean. Weighted mean was used to interpret data gathered from the observation checklist and interview responses. Mendoza and Mendoza (2018) define the weighted mean as an average that accounts for the varying degrees of importance assigned to different items or indicators. It is computed as:

$$\bar{x} = \Sigma(w_i \cdot x_i) / \Sigma w_i$$

where x_i is each value and w_i is its corresponding weight.

A five-point Likert-type scale (Table 1) was used to qualify and interpret the weighted mean for each indicator.

Table 1 Five-Point Rating Scale for Weighted Mean Interpretation

Scale	Interval	Verbal Interpretation
5	4.20 – 5.00	Very High
4	3.40 – 4.19	High
3	2.60 – 3.39	Moderate
2	1.80 – 2.59	Low
1	1.00 – 1.79	Very Low

RESULTS

Preposition Use Across Sections, by Type

Table 2 presents the pre-test results per section, showing the frequency of learners who correctly used prepositions of place, direction, and time prior to any instructional intervention.

Table 2 Pre-Test Results Per Section, by Preposition Type

	PLACE	DIRECTION	TIME
Amethyst	20	10	13
Beryl	21	12	19
Coral	20	9	12
Diamond	19	10	10
Emerald	18	11	8
Jade	21	13	13
Total	119	65	75
Average	80.40%	43.91%	50.67%

Note. Values represent the number of learners per section (out of a maximum of 21) who correctly used the preposition type; averages are expressed as percentages of the total possible score.

Across the six sections, prepositions of place recorded the highest total frequency (119 of 148 possible, 80.40%), followed by prepositions of time (75, 50.67%) and prepositions of direction (65, 43.91%). Beryl and Jade recorded the highest scores for place (21 each), Beryl recorded the highest score for time (19), and Jade recorded the highest score for direction (13). Emerald recorded the lowest scores for place (18) and time (8), while Coral recorded the lowest score for direction (9).

To determine whether these differences across sections were statistically significant, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was computed for each preposition type, comparing learners' scores across the six sections.

Level of Preposition Proficiency

Table 3 presents the mean scores and verbal interpretations for the three components of preposition proficiency measured by the test: identifying, classifying, and using prepositions in sentences.

Table 3 Level of Preposition Proficiency of Grade 3 Learners

Indicators	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Identifying Basic Prepositions		
Recognizing “in,” “on,” and “at”	3.81	High

Understanding when to use “in,” “on,” and “at”	3.91	High
Subtotal	3.86	High
Classifying Prepositions (Time, Place, Direction)		
Prepositions of time	3.88	High
Prepositions of place	4.30	Very High
Prepositions of direction	4.06	High
Subtotal	4.08	High
Using Prepositions in Oral and Written Sentences		
Telling what kind of preposition is used	3.53	Moderate
Using prepositions correctly when speaking	3.60	High
Confusion in using “in,” “on,” and “at”	3.51	Moderate
Subtotal	3.55	Moderate

Learners scored highest on classifying prepositions of place ($M = 4.30$, Very High) and lowest on identifying the type of preposition used in a sentence ($M = 3.53$) and on avoiding confusion between “in,” “on,” and “at” ($M = 3.51$), both interpreted as Moderate. The subtotal for using prepositions in oral and written sentences ($M = 3.55$) was markedly lower than the subtotals for identifying ($M = 3.86$) and classifying ($M = 4.08$) prepositions.

Common Errors in the Use of Prepositions

Table 4 presents the mean scores for the frequency of errors learners committed by preposition type.

Table 4 Common Errors in the Use of Prepositions

Common Errors	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Errors in prepositions of time	4.32	Very High
Errors in prepositions of place	4.33	Very High
Errors in prepositions of direction	4.05	High
Overall Weighted Mean	4.23	Very High

Learners committed a very high level of errors in prepositions of place ($M = 4.33$) and time ($M = 4.32$), and a high level of errors in prepositions of direction ($M = 4.05$), for an overall weighted mean of 4.23 (Very High).

It should be clarified that Table 2 and Table 4 measure different aspects of learners’ preposition performance and are therefore not directly comparable in absolute terms. Table 2 reports the number and percentage of learners per section who used each preposition type correctly on the objective, researcher-made pre-test, with each entry representing a raw count out of a possible 21 learners per section (148 total). Table 4, by contrast, reports the frequency of errors as rated through the classroom observation checklist and supporting interview data, expressed as weighted means on the five-point Likert scale defined in Table 1 (Section 2.5), where higher values indicate that teachers observed errors occurring more frequently across varied classroom tasks and contexts, rather than a raw test score. Consequently, a preposition type can show a comparatively high correct-response rate on the one-time test in Table 2 (e.g., prepositions of place, 80.40%) while also showing a very high weighted-mean error rating in Table 4 ($M = 4.33$): the two results are complementary rather than contradictory. Read together, they indicate that although learners could answer isolated test items correctly, the same preposition types remained a persistent, recurring source of error in day-to-day classroom use—reinforcing the study’s central finding of a gap between test-based competence and consistent applied accuracy.

Perceived Effectiveness of Intervention Materials

Table 5 presents learners' perceptions of the helpfulness of visual and practice-based strategies incorporated into the proposed intervention material, Preposition Playground.

Table 5 Perceived Effectiveness of Proposed Intervention Materials

Intervention Indicators	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Pictures help me understand prepositions better	3.96	High
Practice activities help me improve my use of prepositions	4.03	High
Overall Composite Mean	4.00	High

Learners rated practice-based activities ($M = 4.03$) and pictures ($M = 3.96$) as helpful in improving their understanding and use of prepositions, yielding an overall composite mean of 4.00 (High).

DISCUSSION

Overall, Grade 3 learners showed a strong ability to identify and classify prepositions, especially prepositions of place, but a comparatively weaker ability to apply prepositions correctly in actual oral and written communication. This pattern indicates a gap between declarative, rule-based knowledge and its functional application—a gap that is well documented in second-language and grammar-acquisition research. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) emphasized that grammar knowledge does not automatically translate into communicative competence, and Lightbown and Spada (2013) similarly observed that learners often understand rules but struggle to apply them in real contexts. Harmer (2007) further noted that young learners need repeated, contextual practice to internalize grammar structures such as prepositions. Read together with the present findings, this suggests that Grade 3 learners at the University of Saint Anthony are cognitively capable of identifying and classifying prepositions but require more contextualized, practice-based activities to strengthen functional use in speaking and writing.

The very high error rates in prepositions of place and time, despite learners' comparatively strong classification scores, reinforce this interpretation: learners appear able to recognize and categorize prepositions but struggle to select the correct preposition in context, particularly where subtle distinctions exist (for example, "in" versus "on" versus "at"). This is consistent with Swan's (2005) observation that prepositions are among the most difficult aspects of English grammar because of their idiomatic and context-dependent nature, with Ellis's (2006) finding that learners often rely on memorization rather than understanding of usage patterns, and with Yule's (2010) explanation that the spatial and temporal relationships prepositions express can be abstract and therefore challenging for young learners.

Learners' favorable perception of the proposed intervention material—particularly practice-based activities—supports Paivio's (1991) Dual Coding Theory, which holds that learning is more effective when visual and verbal information are combined. This is further supported by Bruner (1966), who highlighted that young learners learn best through concrete representations, and by Tomlinson (2011), who emphasized the importance of engaging and meaningful instructional materials in language learning. Taken together, these findings suggest that intervention materials for Grade 3 learners should combine visual aids (e.g., pictures, flashcards, illustrated worksheets) with practice-based activities (e.g., games, sentence-building tasks, guided exercises) to close the gap between conceptual knowledge and functional use.

Limitations

This study was limited to Grade 3 learners of a single school and academic year, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other grade levels, school settings, or year cohorts. The reliance on a researcher-made test, while validated by subject teachers, may not fully capture learners' preposition use in spontaneous, real-world communication. Future studies may consider a longitudinal design, a larger and more diverse sample, or a controlled trial of the proposed intervention material to evaluate its effectiveness in improving learners' preposition proficiency over time.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, Grade 3 learners at the University of Saint Anthony possess a solid foundational, conceptual knowledge of prepositions but have not yet fully mastered their functional application, particularly for commonly used prepositions such as in, on, under, and between. This gap appears to stem from limited exposure to meaningful, contextualized grammar instruction and insufficient opportunities to apply preposition knowledge in real-life situations, with variation across sections suggesting differences in learning experiences, teaching strategies, and levels of instructional support. The development of visual, learner-centered instructional materials proved to be a promising intervention, supporting the view that learners improve gradually when provided with structured guidance, continuous practice, and meaningful learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implement contextualized and interactive teaching strategies. Teachers should use real-life situations, games, and interactive activities to teach prepositions, helping learners move beyond identification toward the correct application of prepositions in meaningful communication.

Provide structured and continuous practice opportunities. Learners should be given regular practice through sentence-building tasks, guided exercises, and oral activities, with continuous feedback and assessment to strengthen accuracy and confidence.

Utilize visual and learner-centered instructional materials. Schools and teachers should adopt materials such as *Preposition Playground*, which incorporate pictures, flashcards, and engaging worksheets to support understanding of abstract concepts such as prepositions of place, time, and direction.

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