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Using Visual Art to Teach Prepositional Phrases

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Introduction

The preposition is one of the eight parts of speech¹ in the English language. A preposition indicates a relationship between persons, places or things mentioned in a sentence. There are approximately 80 to 100 prepositions categorized into several classes, such as spatial, comparative, and temporal, depending on the kind of relationship denoted by the preposition. In this manuscript, I focus only on the spatial prepositions as I describe an approach to teaching youngsters about these remarkable² words through the visual arts.

Prepositions in Content Standards

The use of art in learning vocabulary is a strategy that has been widely implemented in language acquisition and content literacy. Bloom (2000) describes the importance of representation in visual imagery when it is used to help children learn the meaning of words. Picture books for young children are filled with images that tell the story as effectively, if not more so, than the text. In later childhood, as language acquisition advances, reliance on images for the purpose of learning words and their meanings tends to be less emphasized in formal schooling. Similarly, in popular literature, fifth graders understand from the *Harry Potter* books the meaning of “boggart” or “bubotuber” with nary an illustration.

It is certainly appropriate that learners will use fewer image-based tools to increase literacy as they gain greater reading comprehension skills. Occasionally, however, an opportunity to utilize tried-and-true visualization strategies from early childhood education will arise in formal education settings. Many state curricula introduce prepositions at intermediate grade levels. State content standards dictate the appropriate age level at which acquisition of the use of prepositions occurs. In my state, North Carolina, the Language Arts Standard Course of Study first mentions the use of prepositions as a competency goal in the fourth grade (NCDPI, 2004). Specifically, students are to: “Elaborate information and ideas in writing and speaking by using...prepositions” (p. 49). California, New Mexico, Ohio, and Wisconsin are among the states that also require students to acquire understanding of the use of prepositions in the fourth grade. The content standards of other states, such as Idaho, South Dakota, and Tennessee, just to name a few, do not mention prepositions as a piece of language arts content to be acquired by students until the middle grades. Many students at such advanced levels of language learning should be able to readily assimilate prepositions as one of the eight parts of speech. What seems to be lacking in many adolescents, however, is the ability to think and speak in terms of spatial relationships.

The Importance of Spatial Prepositions

Landau and Jackendoff (1993) describe the importance of spatial representations as they reflect one’s ability to think spatially. They write: “What sets humans apart from other species is our ability to use these representations to express our spatial experience, talking about what things are and where they are located” (p. 217). Developing youngsters’ ability to recognize and use spatial language is, therefore, an extremely important goal in the language arts. The visual arts provide an ideal venue for discussing spatial concepts in written and spoken language, particularly through the use of prepositions. Fundamental, perhaps, to gaining entrance into the world of prepositions is

the ability to visualize spatial relationships. We can represent spatial relationships in diagrams, maps, and drawings, and we are typically able to do so at a very young age. In the following section, I will describe an arts-rich English lesson appropriate for intermediate- and middle-schoolers.

The Prepositional Alphabet Book

The aim of the unit of instruction is to enhance visual literacy in order to introduce students to prepositions as a part of speech and to familiarize students with the functions of prepositional phrases in a sentence. The goal of the unit is to create an alphabet book of illustrations representative of a variety of prepositional phrases. Introductory comments for the unit of instruction should center on several ideas. First, prepositions are considered quite simply, and most often, as “something in relation to a log.” For example, *the ball is above the log*. Second, a prepositional *phrase* is comprised of a preposition, its object and any associated adjectives or adverbs. These phrases can function as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb. Third, the visual arts provide an excellent way to envision the relationship between the preposition, its object, and any modifying words. The procedure for the unit is as follows:

- Students begin by examining the illustrations in a variety of children’s alphabet books, most notably Caldecott Medal and Honor Award winners, such as *Alphabet City* (Johnson, 2006), *The Graphic Alphabet* (Pelletier, 2006), and *Ape in a Cape: An Alphabet of Odd Animals* (Eichenberg, 1952).
- Then, students generate a variety of prepositional phrases derived from a given or collaboratively selected theme. Themes that work best have the quality of being illustrated simply and contain the names of objects, places, phrases, or persons that begin with every letter of the alphabet. Some examples include foods, monsters, cartoon characters, phobias, musical instruments, animals, plants, and pirates, to name just a few of the themes I have used with my students.
- Using the chart provided in Table 1, students may be assisted in generating outstanding prepositional phrases. To complete the chart, every student in the class selects one of the letters in the left column. Any remaining letters might be offered to students who wish to earn extra credit.
- Each student writes a list of nouns related to the theme in the left column. Again, this task can be completed collaboratively if desired. The first letter of each noun should begin with the assigned alphabet letter.
- Next, each student generates a list of adverbs and adjectives in the open spaces along the top. The adverbs and adjectives can relate to the theme, but not necessarily.
- Each student circles the prepositions in the middle of the table that make the most sense with certain noun and adjective/adverb combinations and that provides the best material for a simple illustration of spatial relationships. Students can use the same prepositions multiple times throughout the entire alphabet book, if necessary. The blank spaces provided in the right column are for the students to insert other spatial prepositions, if they wish.

Theme:	Adjectives and Adverbs (Related to theme, if desired)	
Nouns from theme (One starting with each of the 26 letters) A: B: C: D: E: F: G: H: I: J: K: L: M: N: O: P: Q: R: S: T: U: V: W: X: Y: Z:	Above At Beyond For Of Past Under Without Against Below Despite Inside Onto Throughout Up Among Beside During Like Outside To With Off Since But From Underneath	About Around Between Except Near Over Toward Within After Behind By In On Through Until Along Beneath Down Into Out Till Upon Across Before

Prepositions (Include additional prepositions, if desired)

Table 1. *Prepositional Phrase Generation Chart.*

- Once the prepositional phrases have been created, or perhaps while the process is underway, each student sets his or her phrase(s) in a sentence. Students may be encouraged to create a sentence that provides rich visual imagery that could easily be illustrated.
- Each student sketches an illustration of his or her sentence(s) so that the class collaborates to make illustrations for all of the letters in the alphabet. Students may be encouraged to simplify the illustration, as necessary, in order to clearly demonstrate the relationship visualized in the sentence.
- Each student's finished illustration may then be collected together for a class book. The illustrations may be carefully adhered to a larger piece of paper and assembled in any manner of simple bookbinding. In addition, the sentence

corresponding to each illustration may also be typed, printed, and pasted into place on the appropriate page of the book.

I have personally presented this unit of instruction several times in my elementary art methods classes. My students are not art majors, but most are training to become elementary school teachers. Some examples of their work are shown in Figures 1-4. Please note that we used printmaking processes so that each student could have a copy of the collaborative book.



Figure 1. *Keekers quietly hides inside Kelly's small toy box.*



Figure 2. *The creepy Cyclops has one big eye on his bald head.*

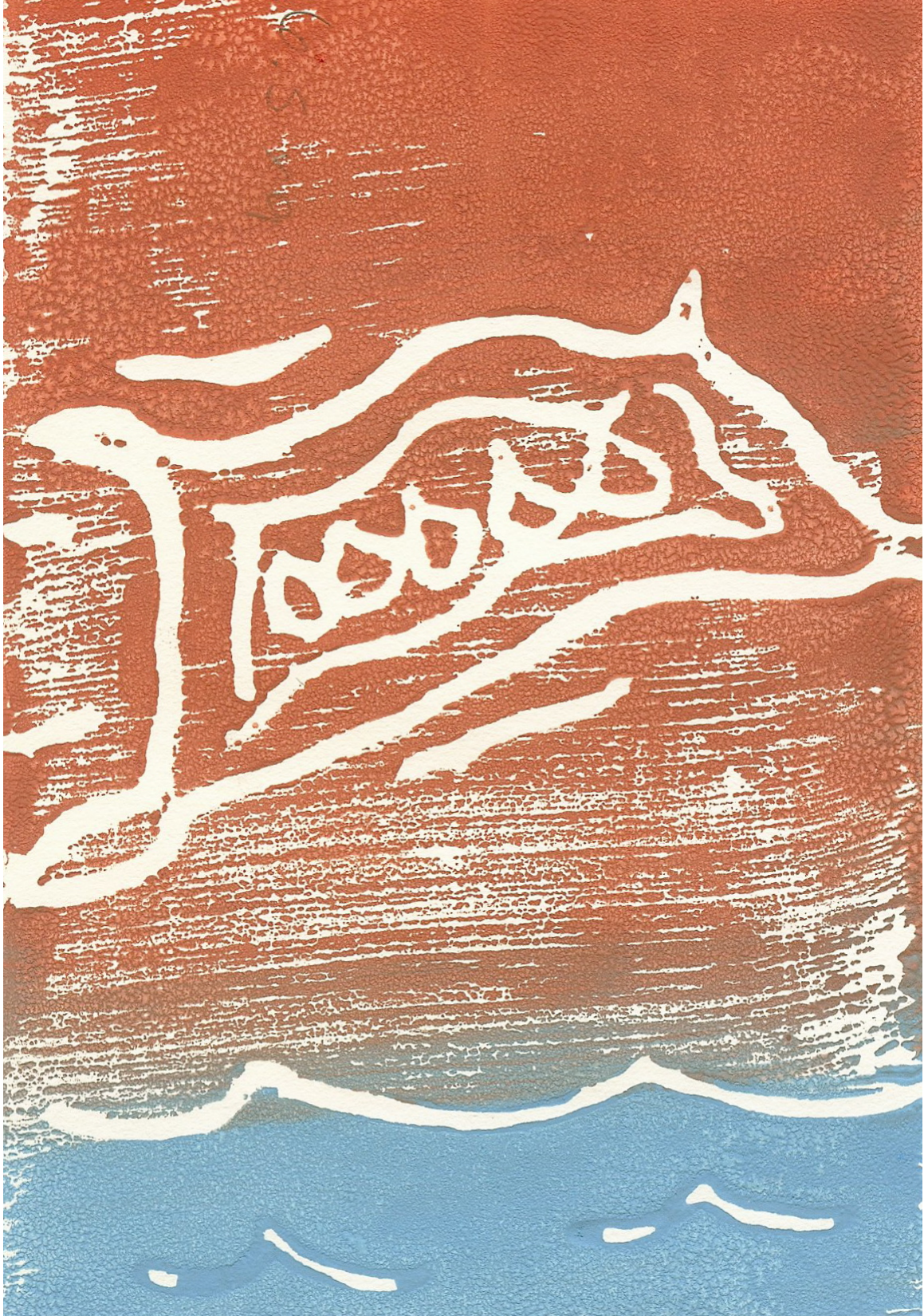


Figure 3. *The Magic Carpet flew over the light blue water into the sunset.*



Figure 4. *Yozzie hid underneath the shadows of the bed waiting to grab Megan's feet.*

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to share some feedback from three former undergraduate students who have participated in this project. You will find their comments helpful for contextualizing the project's applicability in the elementary classroom.

I thought the alphabet book was a great project for students learning to become teachers. It helped me see what different kinds of activities teachers can do in the classroom integrating art. I loved that the art project not only included art but it also included language arts by only using prepositions to describe the picture. This would be a great project in the classroom and I know that I will use it in my future classroom. (E. Bridges, personal communication, May 21, 2010)

The following quote indicates the potential this project holds for affective learning outcomes.

That project in particular showed me some great ways to integrate the alphabet into the child's [sic] perspective to make it more meaningful to them. The entire class was beneficial [sic], but that one assignment in particular taught me that you can go in many [sic] different directions to help many different students with the same assignment. I feel that I can bring more art into my curriculum with the use of the alphabet book. I believe that art can help bring the child's [sic] minds into play more easily and can calm them down if feeling overwhelmed [sic]. (C. Hamilton, personal communication, June 1, 2010)

The final quote indicates the fullness of experience this project potentially provides for students in the elementary classroom.

The project allowed me to notice that there were many different forms to create art, although this is something that I had already been aware of, using printmaking techniques really allowed me truly 'see' the different forms. This is something that I would love to be able to do sometime with my future classrooms, however this is something I believe may be difficult because printmaking, from my understandings, is something that is expensive or something that most teachers may not be able to get a hold of. I feel that the project also opened my eyes to the different ways there are to teach the language arts curriculum. This would be a very neat and unique way to teach the alphabet especially to children that are just learning and have difficulty remembering. I know that the students would love to do a project such as the one that we did and if the resources were available I would love to use the project in my future classes. I feel that the art concept that we used such as printmaking is something that will open up the doors for many different teaching techniques, it wasn't just a printmaking project that we did in class, it was more like a 3D visual of what the arts can provide. Students love to do physically do things with their hands, printmaking would be something that they would not forget, I know I didn't.

I found that book not too long ago and can remember the process it took to make the book as well as how proud we all were to have our outcome come alive when we put our pages together to make the book whole. I truly enjoyed this project and would strongly recommend that you continue to do this with your future classrooms, and if this is something that teachers in the near future would

be able to do in their own classrooms, I know I would personally be grateful [*sic*] and use it to my advantage as well as my students. (D. Hernandez, personal communication, May 23, 2010)

These student quotes support the potential of what I have described in this article; namely, that the preposition as a part of speech is poised to receive some instructional attention through the visual arts. I have argued that the spatial relationships represented through the use of prepositional phrases in the English language are best introduced to youngsters by means of perceptual information. Perceptual information, such as visual imagery, works in conjunction with non-perceptual information to effect concept development (Jones and Smith, 1993).

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Endnotes

¹The eight parts of speech in the English language are adjective, adverb, conjunction, interjection, noun, preposition, pronoun, and verb.

²In itself, a preposition like “in” or “after” is rather meaningless and hard to define in mere words. For instance, when you do try to define a preposition, such as “in” or “between” or “on,” you invariably use your hands to show how something is situated in relationship to something else (Capital Community College Foundation, n.d.).