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**Error Analysis of the Use of English Prepositions
among Czech Secondary School Students**

Analýza chyb v užití předložek
u českých studentů střední školy

Bakalářská práce

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Podpis: _____

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Chtěla bych tímto poděkovat vedoucí práce Mgr. Andree Ramešové za veškerou pomoc a poskytnutí cenných rad, které mi umožnily sepsat tuto závěrečnou práci.

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Abstrakt:

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat chyby v užití anglických předložek místa a času u českých studentů střední školy. Konkrétně se práce zaměřuje na předložky *at*, *on*, *in*, *by*, *over*, *from* a *through*. V teoretické části je popsán systém anglických předložek a jejich zastoupení ve vybraných učebnicích. V praktické části jsou analyzovány chyby, kterých se dopustili studenti v rámci testování na středních školách. Výsledky ukázaly, že s vyšší úrovní angličtiny klesá chybovost v užití vybraných předložek. Vliv výběru učebnice na výkon studentů se při zkoumání nepotvrdil.

Klíčová slova: anglické předložky, předložky místa a času, analýza chyb, angličtina jako cizí jazyk, učebnice angličtiny, úrovně znalostí angličtiny

Abstract:

This thesis examines errors in the use of English prepositions of place and time among Czech secondary school students. Specifically, the thesis focuses on the prepositions *at*, *on*, *in*, *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*. The theoretical part describes the system of English prepositions and their representation in selected course books. The practical part analyses errors committed by students through testing conducted at secondary schools. The results show that error rates for the selected prepositions decrease as students' English levels increase. No significant relationship was found between the choice of a course book and students' performance.

Keywords: English prepositions, spatial and temporal prepositions, error analysis, EFL, English course books, English proficiency levels

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INTRODUCTION

Defined by *The Longman Dictionary of Teaching and Applied Linguistics* as “a word used with nouns, pronouns and gerunds to link them grammatically to other words” (Richards and Schmidt 2010, 452), prepositions are one of the challenging areas of grammar for non-native speakers of the English language and are quite difficult to explain and teach because of their complexity. Firstly, English uses more prepositions than many other languages (Parrott 2000, 94). Regarding their form, most prepositions are simple and only consist of one word, however, some are complex, consisting of two or more words (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 313). Furthermore, prepositions can have multiple meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. Prepositional usage also varies significantly across languages, making it difficult for students to rely on their mother tongue knowledge (Lam 2009, 3).

Many English prepositions are among the most frequently used words in the language, making them essential for students to learn, although according to Parrott (2000, 94), their incorrect usage rarely creates communication issues. For secondary school students in Czechia, English remains a key component of the curriculum, with the state Maturita exam assessing proficiency at a mandatory B1 level.¹ This thesis aims to identify the most common issues in the use of spatial and temporal prepositions for Czech secondary school students and explore how these difficulties change throughout different proficiency levels.

The first chapter is an overview of the English prepositional system, exploring the form, syntax, and the meaning of prepositions. It will also characterize spatial and temporal prepositions.

Seven high-frequency prepositions, *on*, *in*, *at*, *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*, were selected for detailed examination. Their meanings and usage in spatial and temporal contexts are discussed in both English and Czech in the second chapter, as well as their Czech counterparts.

The third chapter is dedicated to the process of learning prepositional use as a non-native English speaker and will describe how prepositions are integrated into four secondary school course books: *Maturita Solutions* (A2 and B1), *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 and B1), *Focus* (A2 and A2/B1), and *Open World* (A2, B1, B2, and C1). These books were selected based on their use in the classes participating in the research.

¹ For more information on the maturita exam, see <https://maturita.cermat.cz/>

The empirical part begins by outlining the methodology of the research, followed by the error analysis and its findings. A total of 82 secondary school students was given a test whose purpose is to identify the problematic features of the use of spatial and temporal prepositions. The students taking part in the test are from the Grammar School in Holice, the Conservatory of Pardubice, and the Secondary School of Informatics and Economics in Pardubice.

To account for varying levels of English proficiency, the first step was to conduct a brief placement test to determine the approximate level of each participant. This test was taken from the Test Your English page on the Cambridge English website (2024) and to ensure reliability and avoid technical issues, the test was administered in a printed format.

Next, students were asked to answer 33 multiple-choice questions in a prepositional test. The focus of the test was on spatial and temporal meanings of the seven prepositions closely analysed in the theoretical part. The research will attempt to answer the following questions: Which of these prepositions are the most challenging for students of English? Do these prepositions cause more difficulties in spatial or temporal contexts? Which errors decrease significantly as students' English proficiency improves?

Ultimately, the research seeks to enhance understanding of how well Czech secondary school students have mastered the use of English prepositions of space and time and demonstrate how common issues evolve or diminish as students' English proficiency increases.

1 ENGLISH PREPOSITIONAL SYSTEM

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the distribution and meaning of English prepositions, as well as various approaches to their classification. I will then focus on prepositions of time and space, which will serve as the focal point of the research. Additionally, I will compare the systems of the two relevant languages, English and Czech.

Longman Dictionary of Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines a preposition as “a word used with nouns, pronouns, and gerunds to link them grammatically to other words” (Richards and Schmidt 2010, 452). Quirk and Baum describe prepositions as items that specify a relationship between the units they connect (1990, 188). Prepositions belong to a relatively closed word class, meaning they rarely admit new words, and the number of members in the class is quite limited (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 155). Both in Czech and in English, prepositions are among the most frequent parts of speech. In both languages, approximately every ninth word is a preposition (Klégr et al. 2012, 7).

1.2 Form of Prepositions

Regarding their form, prepositions can be simple, consisting of one word only, or complex, consisting of two or more words (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 313). Greenbaum and Quirk distinguish between monosyllabic and polysyllabic prepositions (1990, 190). The most common prepositions are monosyllabic and usually unstressed (e.g. *in*, *on*, *at*). Dušková categorizes prepositions into simple, complex, and those consisting of multiple words as a third, separate category. In her approach, complex prepositions are one-word prepositions made up of two distinguishable parts, such as *inside*, *within*, or *into*. However, she notes the loose line between one-word complex prepositions and multi-word prepositions due to orthography inconsistencies (*into* vs. *out of*) or different spelling variations (*onto* vs. *on to*). Dušková further divides multi-word prepositions into three types. In the first type, prepositions consist of an adverb and a preposition (e.g. *along with*, *apart from*). The next category includes prepositions consisting of either a verb form, an adjective, or a conjunction followed by a preposition (e.g. *except for*, *owing to*, *but for*). The third type consists of two prepositions and a noun between them (e.g. *by means of*, *in front of*) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.14). Additionally,

some expressions can combine two prepositions directly, without any intervening elements, as in *until after lunch*.

Dušková also differentiates between primary and secondary prepositions. In English, primary prepositions include *at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, and with*. Secondary prepositions originate from other parts of speech, such as adverbs (e.g. *about, above, across*), infinitive verb forms (e.g. *concerning, considering, including*), nouns and adjectives (e.g. *due to, near, unlike, worth*), or the previously mentioned type consisting of two prepositions with a noun between them (other examples would be *in spite of, in addition to, in case of*) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.15).

1.3 Syntax of Prepositions

In *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk et al. explain that prepositions express relations between a prepositional complement and another part of the sentence (1985, 657). To illustrate this, I will use two examples from Quirk and Baum's *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. In the first sentence, the preposition links its complement (*her help*) to an adjective phrase (*very helpful*).

(1) *(He was) very grateful for her help.*

(2) *In a few minutes, we'll know the result of the blood test.*

In (2), the preposition connects the complement and the following clause. The example also demonstrates that, although prepositional phrases often post-modify noun phrases, they can serve other functions in a sentence. Here, the prepositional phrase functions as an adverbial (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 188).

Biber (1999, 74) distinguishes between free prepositions, which have an independent meaning, and bound prepositions, where the choice of the preposition depends on another word in the context. Examples of free prepositions include temporal expressions like *in June* and spatial expressions like *on the wall*. Bound prepositions, on the other hand, often depend on a preceding verb (e.g. *rely on, confide in*) and these units are known as prepositional verbs.

Gráf (2015, 166) offers a similar classification, distinguishing between dependent and independent prepositions. He states that dependent prepositions form a single semantic unit with the preceding word, while independent prepositions are selected based on the relation to the word that follows. Dependent prepositions are not influenced by what they introduce,

which is “typically an object (e.g. *wait for somebody*) or a nominal complement (e.g. *an expert in early history, good at languages*).”

Not all prepositions require complementation. In *English Prepositions Explained*, Lindstromberg categorizes prepositions based on their (in)transitivity, analysing whether they require a grammatical object. He divides prepositions into three categories: those that must have an object (transitive prepositions), those that may or may not have an object, and those that cannot have an object. For example, *into* is a transitive preposition and requires complementation, whereas *in* can function as either transitive or intransitive (e.g. *to go in, to go into a house*) (Lindstromberg 2010, 17).

The typical position for English prepositions is in front of their complements. For example, in the prepositional phrase *on the table*, the noun phrase *the table* follows the head of the prepositional phrase, *on*. However, prepositions in English can appear after their complements in certain structures, such as passives, *wh*-interrogatives, relative clauses, and infinitive complements. This process, known as preposition stranding, is more typical in informal structures. (Carter and McCarthy, 468–469). In the examples below, the second sentence avoids preposition stranding, resulting in a more formal tone:

- (3) a) *Who do I need to talk to?*
 b) *To whom do I need to talk?*

Dušková points out that in some cases, the preposition cannot precede the complement. When discussing instruments, origin, or aim, the preposition must follow the complement, as illustrated in example (4).

- (4) a) *What is this tool for?*
 b) **What for is this tool?*

As Dušková notes, preposition stranding is not possible in Czech; the preposition cannot appear after the expression it relates to (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.12).

1.4 Meaning of Prepositions

The class of prepositions is synsemantic, meaning that their distinct meaning is only fully realised when they are not used in isolation. A preposition’s full meaning emerges when it is combined with its respective content words (Dušková 2009, sec. 1.2). Lindstromberg highlights the often unclear meaning of prepositions, noting that there is no strict line between the meaning

that comes from the preposition alone and the meaning derived from the entire grammatical structure in which the preposition occurs (2010, 12). Compared to the Czech prepositional system, English prepositions tend to describe the features of reality more specifically (Dušková 2012, 287).

We can categorize the usage of prepositions into contexts with literal meanings and those with figurative meanings. Lindstromberg (2010, 12–13) explains that prepositions are prototypically used in spatial contexts, while figurative meanings are secondary, often derived from the physical ones. To illustrate the difference between these meanings, consider the following sentences with the preposition *on*:

- (5) a. *Put your drink on the table.* (spatial meaning)
 b. *We need to put the responsibility on students' shoulders.* (figurative meaning)

Prepositions can also be classified by the specificity of their meaning. Some prepositions, although somewhat synonymous, differ in scope. For instance, *in* is more general, while *into*, *inside* or *within* are more specific. However, it is not always possible to replace the more specific preposition with the corresponding general one (Lindstromberg 2010, 15).

Dušková categorizes prepositions into four groups based on their meaning: spatial prepositions, temporal prepositions, prepositions of cause, and prepositions of manner. Prepositions of cause include those expressing reason (e.g. *because of*, *due to*), purpose (e.g. *for*, *to*), condition (e.g. *in case for*, *but for*), and concession (e.g. *in spite of*, *despite*). Prepositions of manner have a detailed system of classification in Dušková's grammar, describing how something is done, with what instrument, for what result, by what agency, and so on. (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.33–9.34)

Prepositions often have more than one meaning, depending on the context in which they are used. Thus, they specify different types of relations (Swan 2005, 425). As this thesis focuses on the role prepositions play in indicating spatial and temporal relationships, the next section will describe the characteristics of prepositions of time and space, followed by an exploration of the specific prepositions that students are going to be tested on.

1.5 Spatial Prepositions

Dušková divides spatial prepositions into those that express a static position (e.g. *at*, *on*, *in*, *by*, *above*, *under*, *below*) and those that convey dynamic movement in a direction (e.g. *from*, *to*, *via*,

through, towards, into, across) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31). Greenbaum and Quirk offer a more detailed classification of spatial prepositions, including static position, movement in a direction, and additional categories, such as prepositions expressing relative position of one object to another (e.g. *a house opposite the police station*) and prepositions that imply passage, (e.g. *through, over, by*) (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 192–195).

As previously noted, spatial prepositions can be both used literally and figuratively, expressing abstract meanings through metaphor. Examples in Greenbaum and Quirk illustrate this metaphorical use: compare *in the room* with *in some difficulty*, or *up the hill* with *up the social scale*, *through the tunnel* and *through the ordeal*, and others (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 196).

Dušková focuses on comparing spatial prepositions in English and Czech. Both languages classify them as either static or dynamic. In each language, the meaning of prepositions relies on additional context, but they differ in how this context is applied. For Czech, the meaning of prepositions is often closely tied to grammatical case, while in English, the semantic aspect may be signaled within the verb itself, making it unnecessary to repeat this with the preposition. For instance, in the phrase *arrive at the station*, the verb *arrive* already conveys the idea of a goal, making *at* appropriate instead of *to* (as in *come to a building*) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31).

An important difference Dušková highlights is how Czech spatial prepositions are used consistently across contexts, whereas English prepositions have a hierarchical structure with primary and secondary uses. In Czech, various uses of prepositions can coexist on the same level, but English prepositions may have hierarchical relationships between uses. Some prepositions can only express one spatial relationship (the static *at* or the dynamic *from*), others can express different spatial relationships, either within one level or at both levels. Some prepositions are primarily static (e.g. *at, in, on, by, above, over, below, under*). Primarily dynamic prepositions are for instance *from, to, through, via, off, across*, and others. Most prepositions have both uses and for some, such as *over*, they function on two levels. For instance, *over* in (6) can express either a primary static relationship meaning directly above (*nad* in Czech), or a secondary one, conveying *beyond the hill* in Czech (*za*). Sometimes this leads to ambiguity in expressing spatial relations.

(6) *The helicopter is over the hill.*

Unlike English, Czech uses two different prepositions, which eliminates ambiguity (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31). At the same time, English prepositions offer clarity in other contexts

by distinguishing between meanings that Czech might express with a single preposition and English prepositions in general tend to express reality with more specificity than Czech prepositions, resulting in a more complex system in English. For instance, the Czech preposition *vedle* corresponds to the English *by*, *beside*, or *next to*, while *mezi* can be translated as *among*, *between*, and *amid(st)*. The choice of preposition depends on context, such as the spatial arrangement of objects and subjective factors. English also allows more room for subjective interpretation. For example, the Czech sentence *Divadlo je za nemocnicí* could be translated as *behind*, *beyond*, or *past* the hospital, depending on the speaker's spatial interpretation (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31.13).

1.6 Temporal Prepositions

Dušková distinguishes two types of temporal prepositions based on their meanings. The first type includes prepositions that specify a particular point in time, such as *at*, *in*, *on*, *before*, *after*, *since*, *by*, *between*, or *during*. These prepositions answer the question: *when?* The second type specifies the duration of an action or state indicated by the predicate, including prepositions like *through*, *throughout*, *for*, *during*, *from*, *to*, *till*, and *until*. These prepositions answer the question: *for how long?* (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32). Within these two groups, prepositions of duration can be further classified into those that indicate only starting or ending points, such as *by*, *before*, *from*, *after*, *since*, *till*, *until*, and *up to* (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 198).

When it comes to expressing temporal relationships, there are fewer relational distinctions than for spatial ones. In Dušková's work, as well as in the works of other authors mentioned previously (Lindstromberg 2010, 12–13, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 647–648), temporal prepositions are often conceptualized as spatial prepositions adapted to represent time, conveying parallel meanings. Many spatial prepositions lack temporal equivalents (e.g. *behind*, *under*) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32).

The range of temporal prepositions in Czech is similar to that in English, with two exceptions. English additionally has the prepositions *at* and *through*. These two prepositions, along with several others, are central to my research and will be explored in more detail in the following chapter. Conversely, Czech has two additional temporal prepositions: *ob* and *po*, which English expresses differently. For instance, *ob den* translates to *every other day* in English, and *po nedělích* can be translated as *every Sunday* or *on Sundays* (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.3).

Czech also uses grammatical cases to differentiate meaning. Dušková illustrates this with the Czech preposition *za*. When used with the genitive case, *za* expresses during (e.g. *in any weather* translates to *za každého počasí*; *during the war* to *za války*). However, *za* with the accusative case means *in* or *after* a specific amount of time (e.g. *za půl hodiny* means *in half an hour*). Similarly, Czech also differentiates between meanings of the prepositions *po* and *na* through case usage (e.g. *po celý den* meaning *all day* vs. *po obědě* meaning *after lunch*) (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.3).

1.7 Summary

This chapter presented a foundational overview of the English prepositional system by examining the form, syntax, and meaning of prepositions, as well as highlighting their key characteristics. Initially, we explored the structure and syntactic functions of prepositions. The chapter then delved into the distinctions between literal and metaphorical uses of prepositions, emphasizing how spatial relationships often serve as the basis for both concrete and abstract meanings.

Next, a comparative analysis of English and Czech prepositional systems was provided, with Dušková's English grammar as a primary reference. Differences were noted in how English typically specifies spatial and temporal relationships more precisely than Czech, and in how the English system often depends on contextual or verb-driven meaning, while Czech utilizes grammatical cases to convey nuances. The chapter concluded by examining applications of spatial and temporal prepositions in both languages.

The following chapter will focus on seven selected English prepositions, *on*, *in*, *at*, *by*, *through*, *over*, and *from*, which are commonly used to express both spatial and temporal relationships. Using Dušková's model and insights from other grammar sources, I will analyze each preposition's range of uses in spatial and temporal contexts and note relevant comparisons with Czech.

2 SELECTED PREPOSITIONS OF SPACE AND TIME

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore the various uses of the polysemantic prepositions *in*, *on*, *at*, *by*, *from*, *through*, and *over*, along with their Czech counterparts. I will employ the terminology of *trajector* and *landmark* as used in the referenced literature (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Lindstromberg 2010). The *trajector* refers to the entity that is being located or moved in relation to another entity. The *landmark* is the reference point or entity relative to which the trajector's position or motion is determined. For example, in the sentence: *The book is on the table*, the *book* is the trajector, and the *table* is the landmark. This terminology allows for a precise description of the relationships encoded by prepositions, which will be a central focus of the discussion in this chapter.

2.2 *In* as a Spatial Preposition

The spatial meaning of *in* can be both static and dynamic. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 649) state, it “prototypically denotes a relation in which the trajector is a physical object completely contained within a clearly bounded landmark (e.g. *the man in the study*)”. However, this notion of containment may sometimes apply only loosely. For example, in *the flowers in the vase*, the physical object is only partially contained. In other cases, the landmark may lack clear boundaries, as seen in *the chair in the corner*.

In is seen as dynamic in contexts where a subject is enclosed by a landmark following movement (e.g. *get in the car*) (Lindstromberg 2010, 32).

When expressing a static meaning, *in* corresponds to the Czech *v*. In dynamic contexts, Czech uses *do*, answering the question *where to?* (Dušková 2012, 275).

2.3 *In* as a Temporal Preposition

In is commonly used to refer to periods of time. According to Lindstromberg, the time represented by *in* is typically long enough for us to imagine it as a time frame in which something can exist or occur (2010, 77). Additionally, *in* is used to indicate that an activity will occur within or at the end of a specified time frame, as in *do something in x seconds/minutes/hours*. This usage can also convey that the activity will take place after

the time frame elapses, as in the request: *Call me back in half an hour*, meaning not before thirty minutes pass. Lindstromberg characterizes this usage as more idiomatic (79).

When discussing a period of time with a defined beginning and end, *in* would typically be translated into Czech as *v*, as in *in the 20th century*. However, when referring to a time span without a fixed starting and ending point on a timeline, Czech employs *za*, as illustrated in:

(7) *Can a foreign language be learned in six weeks?*

In this example, the prepositional phrase *in six weeks* would be translated as *za šest týdnů* in Czech (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.1).

2.4 *At* as a Spatial Preposition

The preposition *at* is predominantly used to represent a static position, as it “expresses location in a specific geographical position” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 654). As Lindstromberg observes, the meaning of *at* is often quite vague regarding whether the trajector is near or right by the landmark, whether it is touching the landmark, or whether it is *in*, *on*, or *among* the landmark. However, when *at* is used, the landmark is generally considered to be within reach.

Typical uses of spatial *at* include references to landmarks that are intersections or junctions (*at the street corner*), proper names of buildings such as hotels and restaurants, or points on a route (*at the Odeon, a stop at customs*) (Lindstromberg 2010, 174–176). Dynamic meanings are also possible, such as when *at* describes the movement of a trajector towards a static point, as shown in (8) (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 654):

(8) *The truck was coming right at me.*

Spatial *at* is translated into Czech as *v*, *na*, or *u* depending on the context (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31.1).

2.5 *At* as a Temporal Preposition

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the spatial, static meaning of *at* also metaphorically extends into temporal contexts. Temporal *at* is used to express “dimensionless” points in time (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 196). While these points are typically short or sudden, *at* can also be used for phenomena that are not inherently point-like in reality, such as *at dawn*. This is

because *at* is, regarding meaning, the closest available option among English prepositions, which are limited in number. It can also denote the beginning or end of a period of time, as in *at the beginning of the year*.

In Czech, temporal *at* corresponds to *v*, *na*, and *o* (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.1).

2.6 *On* as a Spatial Preposition

The typical spatial use of *on* occurs when the landmark supports the trajector from below and in physical contact with it. For example, *the pen on a desk* illustrates this typical use (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 650). Without the surface, the physical object would fall due to gravity. Even when this arrangement is rotated and the physical support is more of an illusion, *on* remains appropriate (e.g. *a shadow on a wall*, *the bug on the ceiling*) (Lindstromberg 2010, 51–52).

On is also frequently used with verbs of movement as in *put the pen on a desk*. In such cases, the movement results in the arrangement described by the static use of the preposition (Lindstromberg 2010, 52).

For both static and dynamic meaning, the typical Czech equivalent of *on* is *na* (Dušková 2012, 275).

2.7 *On* as a Temporal Preposition

According to *English Prepositions Explained*, temporal *on* is typically used for medium-sized units of time, most often referring to specific days but also to examples like *on the occasion* (Lindstromberg 2010, 69). If the day or a part of the day is named or specified, we use *on*: *on Christmas day*, *on Thursday*, *on the afternoon we arrived*, etc. In contrast, the preposition *in* is used for more general phrases such as *in the morning*, unless further specified.

For the basic meanings of temporal *on* in English, Czech equivalents are *v* and *za*. However, Czech often omits the preposition entirely, employing the genitive case to denote days or parts of days. For example, *on the following morning* might translate to *příštího rána*. Similarly, the genitive case aligns with phrases using the indefinite article, where *on a summer evening* and *one summer evening* correspond to *jednoho letního večera* in Czech. (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.1).

2.8 *By* as a Spatial Preposition

As a preposition of space, *by* typically denotes horizontal location and indicates proximity. *By* can also combine with verbs of motion to indicate the endpoint of the motion (e.g. *to go by the pond and wait there*).

In Czech, *by* is typically translated as *u* (Dušková 2012, 275). In some contexts, *vedle* can also convey the meaning of *by*. However, as previously mentioned, English prepositions often express nuances of reality with greater precision than their Czech equivalents. For example, *beside* and *next to* may both also correspond to the Czech *vedle* (2012, 287). When used as a dynamic preposition indicating direction, *by* would be translated as *podél* (*to walk by the river* meaning *jít podél řeky*).

2.9 *By* as a Temporal Preposition

Temporal *by* often marks a deadline, as illustrated in the sentence below (Lindstromberg 2010, 144):

(9) *The report must be finished by tomorrow.*

Unlike *from*, *to*, and *till/until*, *since* and *by* do not express the beginning or the endpoint of an action or state. Instead, *by* specifies the latest point in time by which the action or state must occur. In Czech, both *by* and *till/until* are commonly translated as *do*, reflecting the endpoint of the period. For comparison, consider the following sentences provided by Dušková (2009, sec. 9.32.1):

- (10) a) *Stay here till 10 o'clock.*
 b) *Be here by 10 o'clock.*

In Czech, the subtle difference in meaning is expressed through the choice of verb and context rather than the preposition itself.

2.10 *From* as a Spatial Preposition

Prototypically, *from* marks the source location (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 656) and can describe paths leading in various directions.

In Czech, *from* translates as *od* or *z* and answers the question *from where?* Dušková notes that *from* is frequently combined with other spatial prepositions specifying position (e.g. *from*

under...). Additionally, *from* often combines with *to*, expressing either direction or extent, as demonstrated in the following examples:

- (11) a) *I went from the post office to the theatre.*
b) *The Park Road goes from the post office to the theatre.*

In (11) a), the meaning is directional, indicating movement from one location to another. In the second sentence, the phrase describes the path itself, answering questions about its trajectory and length, rather than any change in position (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31).

2.11 *From* as a Temporal Preposition

The temporal meaning of *from*, expressing the beginning of a duration, is metaphorically extended from its spatial sense expressing source. It is often combined with the preposition *to*, which also extends its spatial meaning to denote a goal and is used to express the endpoint in temporal relations (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 656).

In Czech, *from* is translated as *od*, which serves as the sole preposition for contexts in which English distinguishes *from* and *since* (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.3). *Since* marks the beginning of an action or state that continues up to the moment of the utterance. Unlike *from*, *since* is typically used with the present perfect tense in English (2009, sec. 9.32.1)

2.12 *Through* as a Spatial Preposition

Through as a spatial preposition indicates a path, typically describing movement into and out of the other end of a landmark that surrounds the trajector. However, *through* can also be used in contexts where either the entry or exit point is absent. In such cases, the landmark is conceptualized not as an object but as a mass, such as air or water (Lindstromberg 2010, 35, 127). This usage is exemplified in the sentence below:

- (12) *Fish move through the water by waving their fins back and forth.*

In Czech, *through* is commonly translated as *skrz*. However, the meaning is often conveyed using the instrumental case, in which no preposition is needed. For example, *walk through a forest* can be translated either as *jít skrz les* or as *jít lesem*, where the suffix *-em* signals the instrumental case (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31.2).

2.13 *Through* as a Temporal Preposition

Temporal *through* often expresses “the notions of movement and exit”, as in the phrase *through the years* and highlights the passage of time (more than *across* which would also be applicable here) (Lindstromberg 2010, 131–132).

In Czech, *through* is typically translated as *během* or *za* (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.32.3). It can also be expressed by the phrase *po dobu*, signifies the span from the beginning to the end of an action or state (2009, sec. 9.32.1).

2.14 *Over* as a Spatial Preposition

Spatial *over* is used both statically and dynamically. For its static use, *over* is relatively neutral regarding separation between the trajector and the landmark, which is what contrasts it with *above*, where separation is always implied. Lindstromberg illustrates this on the phrase *keep your head above water*, where *over* would not work, and highlights that *over* is more likely to be used when expressing approach, not complete separation, as in *lean over the stream*. Despite these differences, the two prepositions can be used interchangeably in some contexts (Lindstromberg 2010, 109–110).

As a preposition of path, *over* typically denotes a semi-circular path around a landmark or a straight path that passes near or across it. The direction of the path can be both vertical and horizontal (Lindstromberg 2010, 111, 134).

In Czech, *over* is translated as *nad* or *přes*, depending on whether the context is static or dynamic. In some cases, as seen in the examples below, *za* is also a valid translation, applicable to both static and dynamic contexts: (Dušková 2009, sec. 9.31.7):

- (13) a) *Who lives in that house over the river?* (*over the river* meaning *za řekou*)
b) *The criminal escaped over the border.* (*over the border* meaning *přes/za hranice*)

2.15 *Over* as a Temporal Preposition

The temporal use of *over* can be categorized into two distinct meanings. Firstly, it takes on a metaphorical sense of *more than*, which can apply to quantities or time, as in *over a million people* and *over ten years ago*. Secondly, *over* is used to express the extent of time. Lindstromberg describes this as *over* providing a “summary view” of a time period

(e.g. *over the year*). This is what distinguishes it from *throughout*, which emphasizes continuity rather than an overarching summary.

The typical translation of temporal *over* into Czech is *přes* (Dušková 2009, 9.32).

3 ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS AND LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on prepositions in regard to learning English as a foreign language. It examines potential issues faced by learners of English in mastering English prepositions and explores the integration of prepositions in four secondary school course books, *Maturita Solutions* (A2 and B1), *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 and B1), *Focus* (A2 and A2/B1), and *Open World* (A2, B1, B2, and C1).

3.2 Challenges in the Use of Prepositions for Learners of English

Languages differ significantly in their use of prepositions. In English, most prepositions have multiple uses and exhibit polysemy, making their correct usage particularly challenging for learners of a foreign language (Swan 2005, 425). English also has more prepositions than many other languages (Parrott 2000, 94). The use of English prepositions often does not correspond directly to their equivalents in other languages, and different prepositions can have meanings that are very similar to one another. As a result, choosing the correct preposition is difficult (Swan 2005, 425). For instance, as established in the previous chapters, English tends to express spatial relations more specifically than Czech, which may contribute to the difficulties that native Czech speakers face when selecting the correct preposition, especially in cases where Czech uses only one preposition as an equivalent of multiple prepositions in English.

Additionally, many nouns, verbs, and adjectives are followed by specific prepositions (e.g. *the reason for*), requiring learners to memorize these collocations (Swan 2005, 425). As Greenbaum and Quirk (1990, 193) observe, the use of *in*, *on*, and *at*, for example, is often idiomatic. For example, we say *on earth* but *in the world*.

Teaching prepositions is a notoriously challenging aspect of language instruction, requiring methods that effectively convey their meaning and usage. To understand how this is approached in practice, the following section analyzes several secondary school course books, focusing on how they integrate prepositions into learning activities.

3.3 Prepositions in Secondary School Course Books

The course books analyzed are *Focus* (A2 and A2/B1), *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 and B1), *Maturita Solutions* (A2 and B1), and *Open World* (A2, B1, B2, and C1), and were selected

based on their use in the classrooms of the students participating in the research. Although students encounter prepositions in various exercises, texts, dialogues, and activities throughout these books, this section focuses exclusively on parts that directly explain and practice prepositional usage.

3.3.1 Prepositions in *Maturita Solutions* (A2 and B1)

The *Maturita Solutions Pre-Intermediate* textbook (Falla and Davies, 2017), third edition, is used in the first two years of secondary school. One of the initial exercises related to prepositions focuses on describing photos, where students use phrases such as *in the foreground/background*, *in the top left corner/bottom right corner*, *at the top/bottom*, *on the left/right*, and *in the centre* (2017, 26). Later, on page 72, students are asked to fill in gaps with prepositions such as *about*, *after*, *as*, *before*, *for*, *from*, *to*, and a few other monosyllabic words from a provided list. These phrases are tied to job-hunting vocabulary, including expressions like *look for a voluntary position* or *before you go for an interview*. Unit 9's *Word Skills* section delves deeper into verb-preposition collocations. Students are first tasked with identifying collocations within a text and the practice then highlights verbs that can take more than one preposition (e.g., *hear of/about*, *care for/about*, *think about/of*, *throw at/to*, *write to/about*, *agree with/to*) (2017, 101). Finally, the *Vocabulary Builder* section on page 118 includes an exercise specifically targeting prepositions used with adjectives, such as *interested in* and *afraid of*.

The *Maturita Solutions Intermediate* textbook (Falla and Davies, 2017) is used in the third and fourth years of secondary school. The main section dedicated specifically to prepositions appears in the *Vocabulary Builder* for Unit 2, which focuses on prepositions of place. This section briefly explains the use of *on*, *in*, *at*, and highlights distinctions such as the difference between *between* and *among* or *opposite* and *in front of*. For example, the book explains that *on* is used with surfaces, while *in* refers to three-dimensional spaces. Additionally, *in* is used for large areas, whereas *at* is used to indicate “a place where something happens.” Below these explanations, students are provided with an exercise to apply these distinctions (2017, 122). In the *2F Reading* section, students encounter a different set of spatial prepositions (*across*, *all along*, *all over*, *below*, *beside*, and *by*) in a text (2017, 26–27). Several smaller sections also address prepositions in collocations with specific adjectives (e.g. *responsible for*, *obsessed with*, *successful in*) on page 57 and verbs (e.g. *appeal to*, *worry about*, *respond to*) on pages 71 and 124.

The books do not directly target the use of temporal prepositions.

3.3.2 Prepositions in *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 and B1)

The *Gateway to Maturita* (A2) textbook (Spencer, 2016) includes structured activities to teach prepositions of time and place. In Unit 1, the textbook dedicates a section to prepositions of time, where students complete rules for using *in*, *on*, and *at* based on provided example sentences, such as *at half past eight*, *on Saturday*, and *in the afternoon* (2016, 17). The accompanying rules, revisited in the Language Checkpoint for Unit 1, concisely outline the usage of these prepositions: *in* is used with parts of the day, months, and years; *on* with days and dates; and *at* with specific times, *night*, and *the weekend*. Unit 2 shifts the focus to prepositions of place, featuring multiple exercises that engage students with spatial relations. Students match sentences describing position with pictures representing various spatial relationships, such as *under it*, *near*, *behind*, *in front of*, *next to*, *in*, and *above* (2016, 29). The Language Checkpoint for Unit 2 on page 36 consolidates this knowledge, presenting the correct answers alongside two additional exercises where students fill in missing prepositions based on contextual clues. These sections provide a practical foundation for learners to understand and apply basic prepositions of time and place, using clear rules and visual aids to support comprehension and retention.

In the second unit of the B1 course book, Unit 4 explains present perfect and with that, the grammar reference explains and practices the use of *for* vs *since* (Spencer 2016, 54–55). Unit 10 deals with the passive voice which introduces students to the preposition *by* used when adding the agent (2016, 132).

3.3.3 Prepositions in *Focus* (A2 and A2/B1)

In the A2-level course book (Reilly, Umińska, and Michałowski, 2016), prepositions are integrated into various activities across the units. Unit 1 includes a listening exercise on typical weekends, focusing on the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* in both spatial and temporal contexts (2016, 15). On page 37, prepositions are practiced through collocations related to jobs, such as *work for a company*, *work from home*, and *work with children*. Unit 6 features a reading exercise where students complete sentences with prepositions from the text, encountering phrases like *at the age of seventeen*, *move to Europe*, *the largest stadium in the world*, *believe in someone*, and *pay for equipment* (2016, 77). Another exercise on page 100 incorporates phrases like *on a bus* and *relax by the sea*. Unit 7's speaking section focuses on directions,

introducing expressions like *between the bank and the café*, *on the corner*, *opposite the park*, and *in the park* (2016, 91). A brief explanation of spatial prepositions is included in the Grammar Focus section, featuring examples such as *between*, *in*, *in front of*, *next to*, *on*, *opposite*, *over*, and *under*. These are practiced further in an accompanying exercise (2016, 109–110).

Unit 1 of the A2/B1-level course book introduces adjectives commonly paired with prepositions, such as *interested in*, *involved in*, *keen on*, *good at*, and *responsible for* (Kay, Jones, Michałowski, and Brayshaw 2016, 13). Unit 4 includes a listening exercise on spatial prepositions, teaching phrases like *on the desk*, *next to*, *in the corner*, and *on top of* (2016, 51).

Although both *Focus* textbooks provide brief coverage of spatial prepositions, they pay minimal attention to temporal prepositions.

3.3.4 Prepositions in *Open World* (A2, B1, and B2)

The A2-level *Open World* course book provides targeted practice for spatial prepositions such as *behind*, *between*, *in front of*, *next to*, *opposite*, and *under*. One exercise focuses on pronunciation, where students listen to and repeat phrases using these prepositions (Cowper, Dignen, and White 2019, 104–105). The speaking section of Unit 8 expands on these prepositions with phrases like *at the back of*, *in the middle of*, *on the left*, and *on the wall*. Additionally, the unit introduces the distinction between *for* and *since* in the context of the present perfect tense, which is further reinforced in the Grammar Reference section (2019, 105, 212). In the B1-level course book, Unit 2 revisits the distinction between the present perfect and past simple tenses, again addressing the use of *for* and *since* (Humphreys, Kingsley, and Dignen 2019, 31, 203).

The B2-level book includes more advanced prepositional content. Unit 6 covers prepositions in spatial and temporal contexts, as well as fixed phrases like *insist on*, *regarded as*, *approve of*, and *look forward to*. These phrases are then revisited in Progress Check 3 (Cosgrove and Hobbs 2019, 118). Spatial prepositions such as *at*, *in*, and *on* are explained and practiced in the Grammar Check for Unit 6 (2019, 216).

3.3.5 Prepositions in *Open World* (C1)

The *Open World* C1 course book provides extensive coverage of prepositional phrases. A vocabulary section on page 32 focuses on phrases like *on the road*, *in turn*, and *for a start*. One exercise highlights how changing the preposition can alter the meaning of an entire phrase, comparing examples such as *for a start* versus *at the start*, *on the road* versus *in the road*, and *at the time* versus *at times*. The book introduces C2-level prepositional phrases such as *in favour of*, *in retrospect*, *in the vicinity of*, and *out of season*, with two exercises for practice (Cosgrove and Wijayatilake 2019, 34). Additional vocabulary-building exercises are found on page 124, where students explain the meanings of highlighted phrases, complete prepositional phrases with missing words, and rewrite sentences using prepositions to maintain a similar meaning of the sentence given. The Progress Check on page 157 includes further practice with prepositional phrases, and an exercise on page 165 focuses on adding the correct prepositions to noun phrases (e.g., *affection for the king*, *a rejection of aesthetic values*). The book generally offers many *Use of English* exercises and emphasizes fixed expressions involving prepositions.

Similar to most other course books, the *Open World* series addresses the basic uses of prepositions in spatial contexts. However, apart from distinguishing between *for* and *since*, it offers little direct focus on temporal prepositions.

3.4 Summary

Overall, the analyzed textbooks integrate prepositional use into a variety of activities, providing students with opportunities to encounter prepositions in diverse contexts. This approach prioritizes practical application over systematic explanation. The textbooks frequently cover collocations involving prepositions and provide at least basic explanations and practice for spatial prepositions. Temporal prepositions, however, receive comparatively less attention. This indicates a strong focus on practical, context-based learning, though it may leave gaps in addressing the broader range of prepositions in a more systematic manner, especially when describing temporal relations.

4 THE USE OF SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL PREPOSITIONS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

4.1 Introduction

The empirical part of this thesis examines the use of spatial and temporal prepositions among 82 students from three secondary schools: the Conservatory of Pardubice, Dr. Emil Holub Grammar School in Holice, and the Secondary School of Informatics and Economics in Pardubice. Students were tested using a multiple-choice test consisting of 33 questions, covering the seven prepositions analyzed in Chapter 2: *in*, *on*, *at*, *by*, *through*, *from*, and *over*.

This study employs a quantitative approach to explore Czech students' usage of spatial and temporal prepositions, aiming to answer the following questions: Which of these prepositions are the most challenging for students of English? Do these prepositions cause more difficulties in spatial or temporal contexts? Which errors decrease significantly as students' English proficiency improves?

4.2 Methodology

To assess the students' proficiency levels, all participants first completed a placement test from the Cambridge English website.² The General English online test consists of 25 multiple-choice questions and provides a quick, approximate evaluation of proficiency.

The main component of the research was a multiple-choice test designed to evaluate students' use of prepositions. This test consisted of 33 statements, each with a missing preposition. Students were given four options for each question, one of which was correct, and a fifth option, "I don't know," to minimize random guessing.

The test was structured to assess both spatial and temporal usage. There were 17 questions evaluating *in*, *on*, and *at*, and 16 questions testing *by*, *through*, *from*, and *over*.

Data analysis proceeds as follows: The results from each school will be briefly compared, focusing on the number of students, textbooks used in class, and students' proficiency levels. Next, a comparison will be made across proficiency levels to identify patterns, highlighting errors that occur more or less frequently at different levels. The analysis will also highlight

² The chosen test is "General English": <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/>

the most and least challenging questions for students. Finally, the research findings will be summarized to provide a comprehensive overview.

4.3 Limitations

The placement test provides only an approximate evaluation of proficiency. This limitation may affect the precision of the comparisons between proficiency levels. Another limitation lies in the restricted range of contexts examined. The study focuses on seven prepositions in specific, predefined scenarios. While this allows for targeted analysis, it may not fully capture the scope of challenges learners face with these prepositions in broader or more typical uses. For example, the high error rates observed for *on*, particularly in spatial contexts, may be influenced by the specificity of the questions (e.g. *on campus*) rather than more fundamental uses of the preposition (e.g. *on the table*). This could affect the generalizability of the findings and complicate comparisons among the selected prepositions.

4.4 Classes of the Conservatory of Pardubice

A total of 38 students from the Conservatory of Pardubice were tested, with one class from each year participating. Classes from all four years attend three English lessons per week, using *Focus* (two books: A2 for the first two years and A2/ B1-level for the consequent two) or *Gateway to Maturita* (two books: A2 for the first two years and B1-level for the consequent two) course books. As seen in the previous chapter, *Gateway to Maturita* focuses on both spatial and temporal prepositions more than *Focus*, which briefly practices spatial relations, but mainly introduces collocations with verbs or adjectives. The third-year class, the only group using *Focus* among the four tested, exhibited the highest error rates. However, this is likely attributable to students' lower placement test results compared to the other groups, rather than to the choice of a textbook. Most students in the third-year class were assessed at approximately an A2 level, with only one student reaching B1 proficiency.

Regarding all four groups, results from the placement test ranged from an approximate A2 level of English proficiency (21 students) to B2/C1 (five students, three of them from the fourth year). The fourth-year students demonstrated the best performance in the prepositional test, with significantly lower error rates than the other groups. This aligns with their generally higher proficiency levels, as all but two students in this group achieved above-A2 levels. The other two B2/C1-level students were from the first-year class and had similar results as the B2/C1 students from the fourth year.

4.5 Classes of the Grammar School in Holice

Two classes were tested at Dr. Emil Holub Grammar School: a second-year class with 14 students and a third-year class with 18 students. The school uses the third edition of *Maturita Solutions* course books, the pre-intermediate level book for the first two years and intermediate for the consequent two. These books barely mention the use of temporal prepositions and focus mainly on collocations regarding prepositional use. There is a section covering the spatial use of *at*, *on*, *in*, as well as exercises practicing other spatial prepositions in the B1 course book. Second-year students attend three lessons of English per week, while third-year students have five. Most of the students in the classes (21 out of 32) were at approximately the B1 level (including A2/B1 and B1/B2). In each class, there was one person assessed at C1/C2 level.

Compared to the second-year class from this grammar school, the third-year students had lower error rates overall. The results from the third-year group were only slightly lower than those of the fourth-year conservatory students, whose proficiency levels were similar. While third-year grammar school students now have more English lessons per week than conservatory students, the latter benefit from an additional year of consistent practice.

4.6 Class of the Secondary School of Informatics and Economics

12 fourth-year students participated in the testing at this school. They use the *Open World* coursebook (C1 level in the fourth year) and attend eight English lessons per week. While the three books preceding the C1 level cover spatial prepositions and the temporal use of *for* (vs *since*), the C1 course book expands students' vocabulary by introducing many fixed prepositional phrases (e.g. *out of season*). Most students in this class were at an approximate B2 or B2/C1 level. The lowest score recorded was 13 points (from an A2-level student). The highest score was 31 points, the top score across all classes. This class achieved the best overall results, which aligns with the school's focus on English proficiency.

Since I found no significant connection between the course books used in class and the error rates across the different classes, I attribute the differences in error rates primarily to proficiency levels. I will now analyze each proficiency level separately and compare the results to identify any emerging patterns.

4.7 A2 Level Students

Among the 82 students tested, 26 were assessed at an approximate A2 level. Scores on the prepositional test for this group ranged from a low of 5 points to a high of 23 points out of 33.

The most problematic preposition for this group was *by*, with error rates of 83% for spatial contexts and 90% for temporal contexts. The second most challenging preposition was *on*, with error rates of 77% for spatial and 71% for temporal contexts. Unlike *by*, where the error rate drops at higher proficiency levels, *on* remains problematic across all levels, especially in spatial contexts, due to its complex usage and phrases that often need to be memorised instead of following clear rules. In contrast, *temporal in* caused the least difficulty, with an error rate of 37%, followed by *spatial from* at 40%. For the prepositions *at*, *on*, and *in*, spatial contexts proved more challenging overall. However, for the remaining prepositions (*by*, *through*, *from*, and *over*), students made more errors in temporal contexts. This trend is visible at higher proficiency levels as well. Additionally, for all levels, there is a notable difference in error rates for spatial and temporal uses of *in*, with errors being significantly lower in temporal contexts.

Overall, students made minimal use of the “I don’t know” option. However, it was notably more frequent at this proficiency level compared to others: 16 out of 26 students selected it at least once, while only two students out of 13 at the A2/B1 level did so. The “I don’t know” option was chosen most often for questions testing temporal *over* (14 out of 52 questions) and spatial *through* (8 out of 52 questions). These responses have been included in the error rate. The higher uncertainty for these two prepositions at this level suggests that students with lower proficiency may not have frequently encountered these usages and are, therefore, less familiar with their meanings.

The least problematic item was question 33 (*at the moment*, testing *temporal at*), with only four students making an error. The most problematic items were: Q6 (*at my grandmother’s*, 25 errors), Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 24 errors), Q12 (*walking in the direction of*, 24 errors), and Q24 (*by the time I got to the party*, 24 errors).

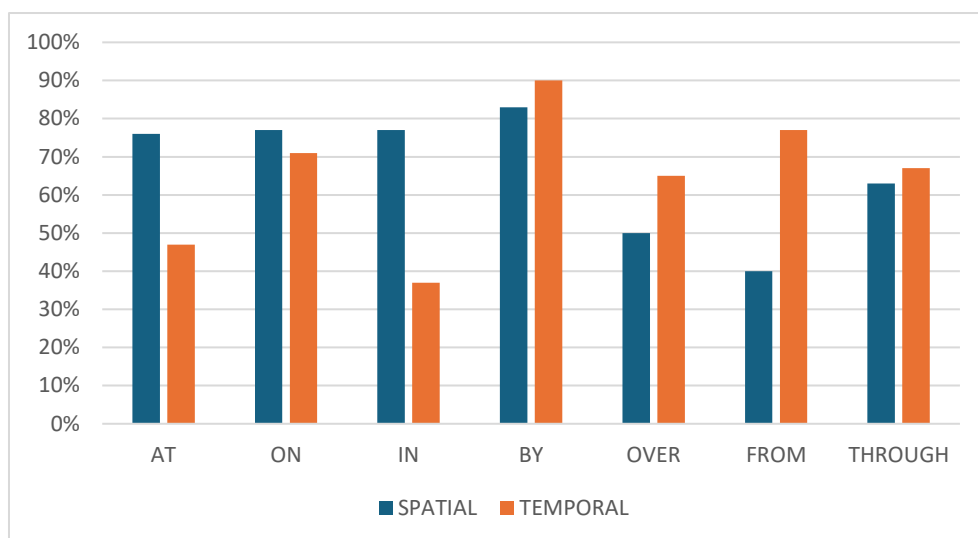


Figure 1. Error Rates for A2-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts.

4.8 A2 to B1 Level Students

13 students were assessed at the A2 to B1 proficiency level. Scores from the prepositional test ranged from 6 to 25 points out of 33.

Even though the error rates for *by* are much lower than for the A2 group, it remains the most problematic preposition. However, as results from the higher levels show, students' ability to use the preposition correctly in both contexts improves significantly above the A2 level. This suggests that with increased proficiency, its use becomes easier for students to understand. The second most challenging was *on*, with error rates of 54% for spatial contexts and 49% for temporal contexts. In contrast, spatial *from* proved to be the least problematic, with an error rate of just 12%, followed by spatial *over* at 31%. From this level onward, there is a big difference between the error rates for spatial and temporal *from* (at this level, the difference in error rates is 53%). Spatial *from* has consistently very low error rates, whereas temporal *from* generally causes more issues, as students in the test most frequently confused it with *since*.

The least problematic items were: Q21 (*over the Pacific Ocean*, 1 error), Q33 (*at the moment*, 1 error), Q23 (*from the house*, 2 errors) and Q26 (*through the tunnel*, 2 errors). The most problematic items were: Q5 (*from that time on*, 10 errors), Q6 (*at my grandmother's*, 10 errors), Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 11 errors), and Q24 (*by the time I got to the party*, 9 errors).

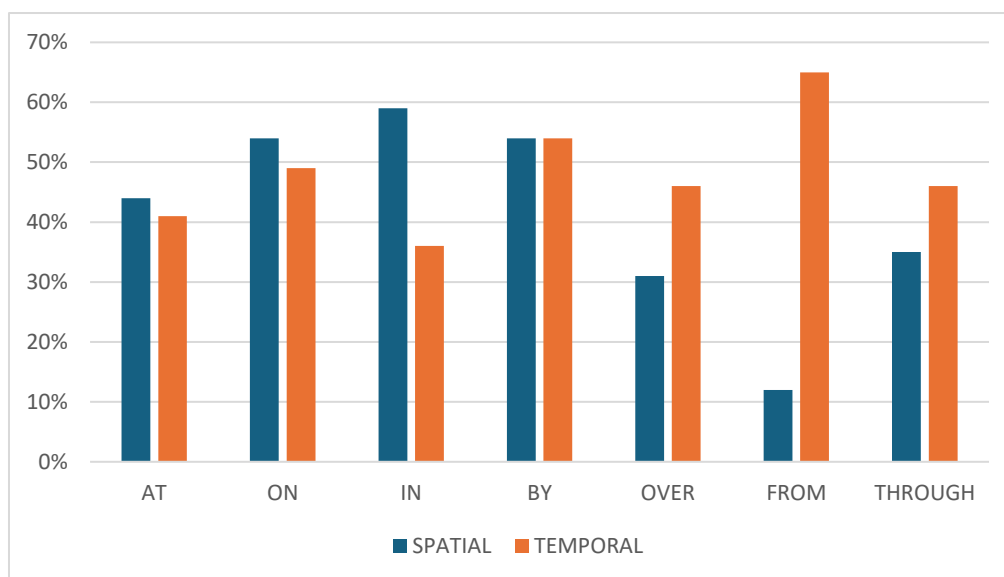


Figure 2. Error Rates for A2/B1-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts.

4.9 B1 Level Students

12 students were assessed at the B1 proficiency level. Their scores on the prepositional test ranged from 17 to 26 points out of 33.

The most problematic preposition for this level was also *on*, however, its error rate for temporal contexts decreased. At higher proficiency levels, students appear to have a better understanding of its use when referring to specific days or parts of days (e.g. *on the night of September 13*). As mentioned in the previous subchapter, temporal *from* continued to have a significantly higher error rate compared to spatial *from* (by 50% at this level). The least problematic preposition was spatial *by*, with an error rate of just 8%. Overall, *by* had the best results among all prepositions in this group, in contrast to the two preceding levels, where it was the most problematic preposition. Its usage continues to be much less challenging at higher levels. The error rate of *through* also decreased, especially for its spatial meaning, which similarly to *by*, indicates a solid understanding of the preposition's use once students reach approximately the B1 level.

The least problematic items with zero errors were: Q11 (*by the river*) and Q23 (*from the house*). The most problematic were: Q1 (*on the coast*, 9 errors), Q5 (*from that time on*, 10 errors), and Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 9 errors).

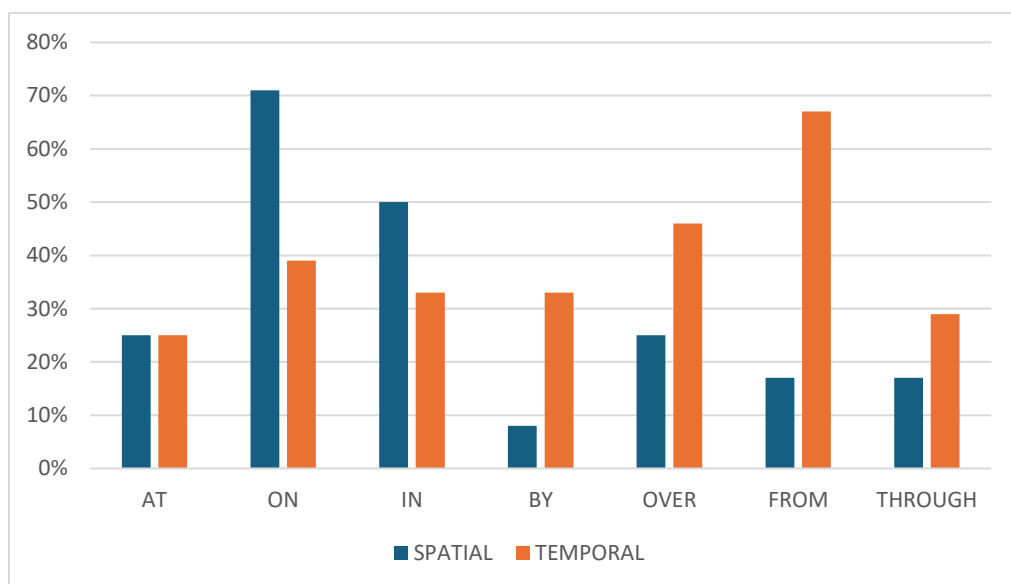


Figure 3. Error Rates for B1-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts.

4.10 B1 to B2 Level Students

Nine students were assessed at the B1/B2 proficiency level. Their scores on the prepositional test ranged from 18 to 29 points out of 33.

Beyond *on* and *in* in their spatial uses, which kept high error rates, other prepositions had error rates below 40%. The least problematic preposition was spatial *through*, with an error rate of just 6%. Overall, *through* exhibited the best results among this group.

There were three zero error questions: Q21 (*over the Pacific Ocean*), Q23 (*from the house*), and Q26 (*through the tunnel*). The most problematic items were: Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 8 errors), Q22 (*on campus*, 8 errors), and Q25 (*in the end*, 7 errors).

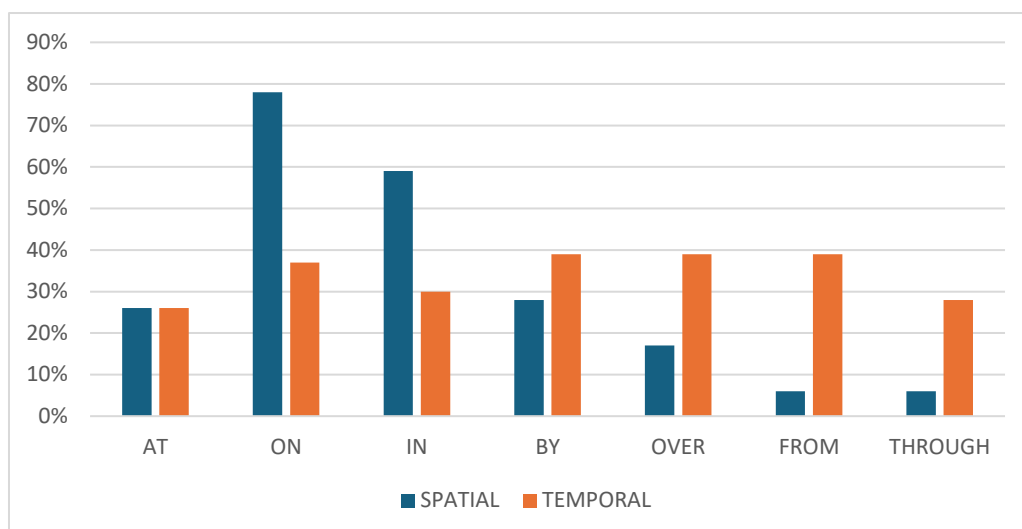


Figure 4. Error Rates for B1/B2-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts.

4.11 B2 Level Students

Nine students were assessed at the B2 proficiency level. Scores ranged from 20 to 30 points out of 33 on the prepositional test.

For this group, the preposition causing the most difficulty overall was temporal *from*, which had an error rate of 67%, just like at the B1 level. In contrast, spatial *from* had the lowest error rate in the class, at just 6%, showing the largest difference in accuracy between spatial and temporal uses. *Over* performed the best in this group, with no errors in its spatial meaning and only an 11% error rate in its temporal use, followed by *through* with error rates of 6% in spatial contexts and 13% in temporal, confirming students' ability to use these two prepositions correctly at higher proficiency levels. *By*'s error rates are continuously lower as well.

There were five zero error questions: Q11 (*by the river*), Q17 (*over the fire*), Q21 (*over the Pacific Ocean*), Q23 (*from the house*), and Q26 (*through the tunnel*). The most problematic items were: Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 7 errors) and Q18 (*from the moment the game started*, 7 errors).

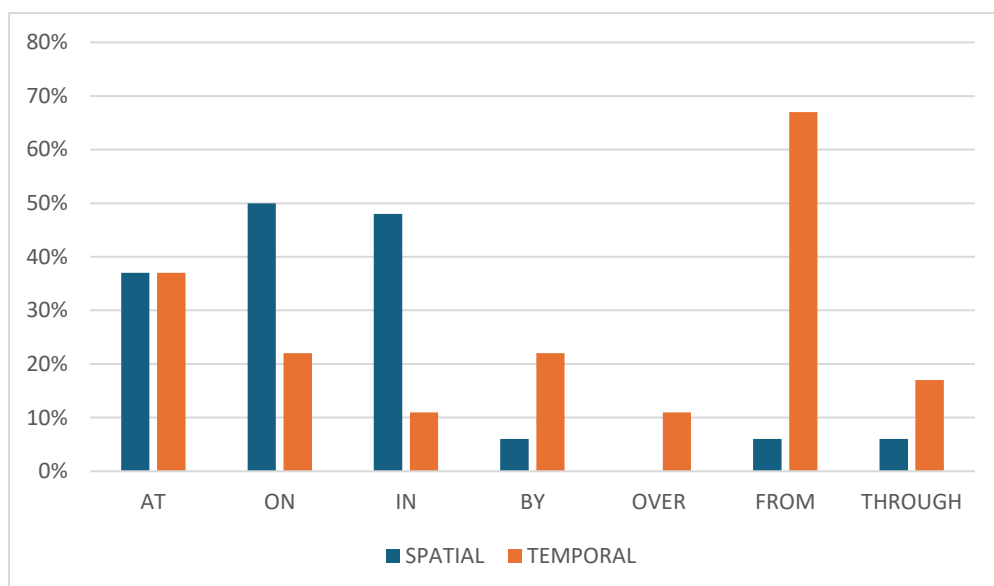


Figure 5. Error Rates for B2-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts

4.12 B2 to C1 Level Students

10 students tested at the B2/C1 proficiency level. Scores ranged from 22 to 30 points out of 33 on the prepositional test.

All prepositions with the exception of spatial *on* and *in* had error rates below 30%, with spatial *from* achieving zero errors. *From*, *through*, and *over* each had a 20% error rate across both contexts.

There were eight zero error questions: Q2 (*by 7 a.m.*), Q9 (*in 20 minutes*), Q23 (*from the house*), Q26 (*through the tunnel*), Q28 (*at the entrance*), Q30 (*from the airport*), Q31 (*in the morning*), and 33 (*at the moment*). The most problematic items were Q1 (*on the coast*, 6 errors) and Q10 (*arrived in Prague*, 9 errors).

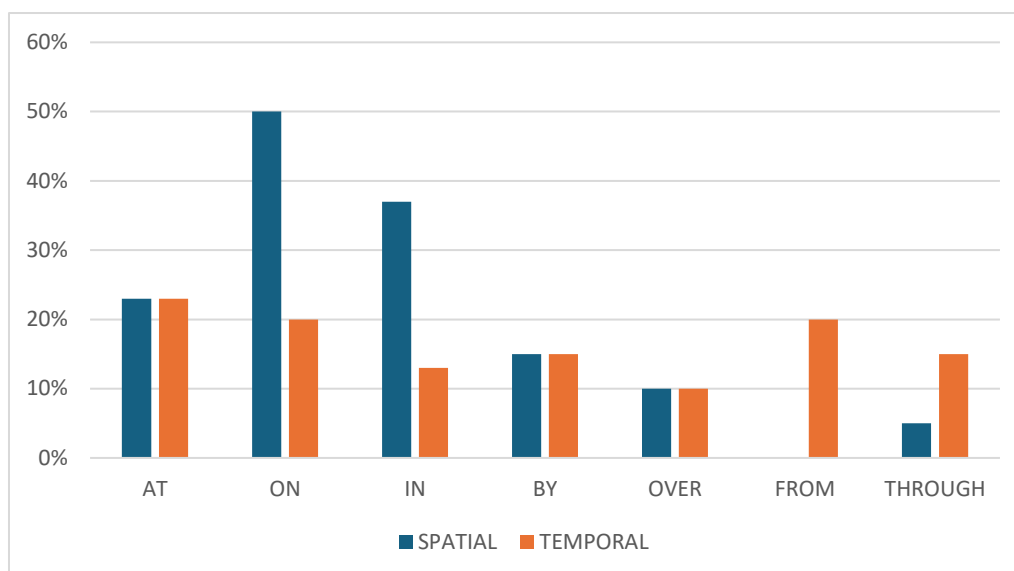


Figure 6. Error Rates for B2/C1-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts

4.13 C1 to C2 Level Students

There were no C1 results in the placement test. Only three students (two from each of the grammar school classes and one from the school of informatics) tested at the C1/C2 level, and due to their significantly different results from the B2/C1 group, their performance will be analyzed separately. The scores on the prepositional tests for these students were 26, 29, and 31 points, respectively.

Most of the questions were answered correctly by all three students (24 out of 33). Students committed no errors in questions testing both spatial and temporal *at*, spatial and temporal *over*, spatial *on* (which caused more issues than temporal in all the other groups), spatial *from*, and temporal *by*.

All three students answered question 10 incorrectly (*arrive in Prague*), which resulted in the 33% error rate for spatial *in*. The only two items with two errors tested the use of temporal *through* (Q14: *through the night* and Q32: *through the semester*), which caused the 67% error rate. The fact that two out of the three C1/C2 students chose *across* instead of *through* suggests that even advanced learners can occasionally struggle with differentiating these prepositions in specific contexts. However, given the small sample size for this proficiency level, it is also likely that this result is partly due to random variation rather than a meaningful trend.

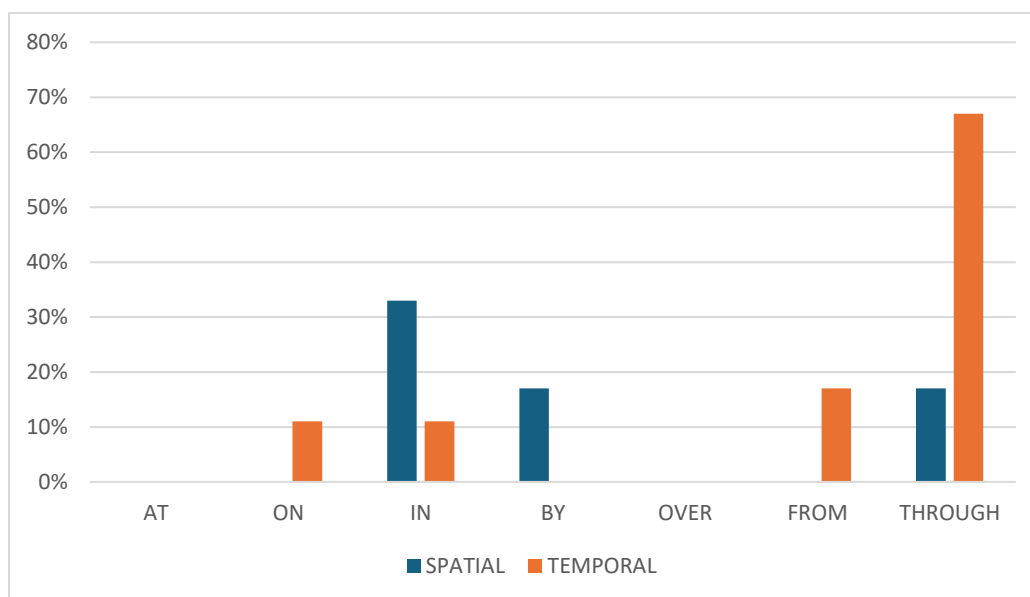


Figure 7. Error Rates for C1/C2-Level Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts

4.14 Overall Results and Proficiency-Level Comparison

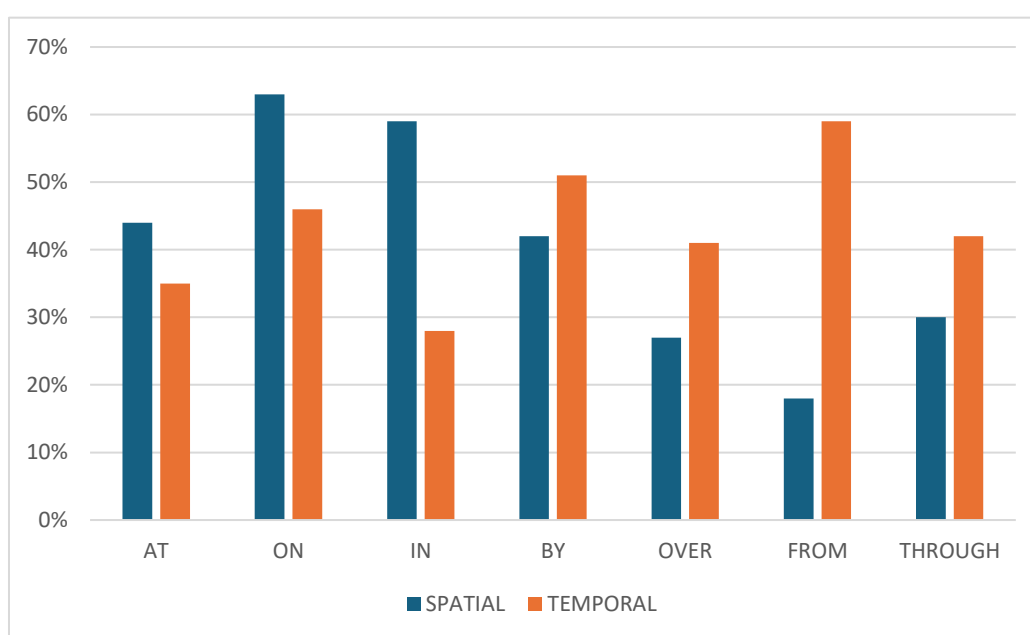


Figure 8. Error Rates for All 82 Students in Spatial and Temporal Contexts

As shown in the graph above, spatial contexts caused more errors than temporal ones for *in*, *on*, and *at*. However, the opposite trend was observed for *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*. For *in*, *on*, and *at*, the temporal meanings seem to be relatively straightforward and are often used in fixed, highly repetitive expressions (e.g. *in the morning*). In contrast, the spatial meanings of *in*, *on*, and *at* are more nuanced and context dependent. The variability in their usage can make spatial

meanings harder to learn and apply accurately. For *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*, it is plausible that their temporal uses are more abstract, leading to higher error rates, whereas spatial uses of these prepositions are often easier to grasp intuitively once students learn their typical meanings.

For *at*, the error rates for spatial and temporal meanings were similar (except for A2 where the difference between was 29%), but spatial *at* overall still caused more problems than temporal. This likely reflects that *at* is generally consistent in its function, serving as a point in both spatial and temporal contexts. However, the slightly higher error rates for spatial *at* may stem from the greater variability in its application in spatial scenarios. At the A2 level, the larger difference in error rates could suggest that beginner learners are still developing the foundational understanding of *at* in spatial contexts and may be more prone to confusing it with *in* or *on*. As proficiency increases, learners become more familiar with its spatial uses, which narrows the gap between spatial and temporal error rates. The least problematic phrase for *at* was *at the moment* (Q33, 13 errors). According to the Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus available online, this phrase is rated at A2 level (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). The most problematic phrase was *at my grandmother's* (Q6, 46 errors), where students frequently used *with* instead, likely conflating being *with* someone and being *at* someone's place, since both involve a connection to a person.

On was the most problematic preposition overall. At the A2 and A2/B1 levels, students made a similar number of errors for its spatial and temporal uses, although slightly more in spatial contexts. This suggests that beginners struggle equally with both meanings, reflecting a lack of familiarity with its varied applications. As proficiency increases, students gain a clearer understanding of the temporal uses of *on*, which are relatively straightforward and tied to fixed patterns. By the B1 level and beyond, the difference between the two uses of *on* became significant, ranging from 30% for B2/C1 to 41% for B1/B2. C1/C2 students answered all spatial *on* questions correctly. The phrase *on the last weekend of March* (Q27, 32 errors) caused the fewest difficulties, whereas *on the coast of California* (Q1, 54 errors) posed the greatest challenge.

The difference in error rates for spatial and temporal *in* remained substantial across all proficiency levels, with spatial *in* consistently causing more difficulties. The least problematic phrase for *in* was *arrive in 20 minutes* (Q9, 18 errors), which the Cambridge online dictionary places at the A2 level. The problematic spatial use of *in* was largely due to the phrase *arrive*

in Prague, where most students incorrectly selected *to* instead (Q10, 71 errors). This was the question with the highest number of errors overall. Additionally, 50% of students also made an error with the phrase *walking in the direction of the mountain* (Q12), choosing *for* or *to* instead.

The least problematic phrase for *by* was *a small café by the river* (Q11, 32 errors). Cambridge English Dictionary and Thesaurus places this meaning of “near or at the side of” at the B1 level. The most problematic was *by the time I got to the party* (Q24, 48 errors), where most students chose *before* instead. Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus considers the meaning of “not later than” for *by* at A2. In accordance with this, the error rate for temporal *by* drops notably at B1.

As previously stated, *over* caused the least issues overall. Up to the B2 level, *over* in its temporal meaning caused more errors than its spatial use. However, at the B2/C1 level, the error rates for both were identical (10%), and the three C1/C2 students made no errors with either use of *over*. The error rates for *over* decreased across the levels. According to the Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus, both its spatial and temporal meanings of *over* correspond to B1 level. From B1/B2 to B2, the error rate of temporal *over* dropped by 28%, which aligns with the dictionary placement. The least problematic phrase for *over* was *over the Pacific Ocean* (Q21, 11 errors). The most problematic was *over the course of one year* (Q29, 36 errors). Likely because of quite clear rules for its usage, students do not encounter many issues using the preposition.

For *from*, spatial *from* was the least problematic or one of the least problematic prepositions for all levels, with the highest error rate at 40% for A2, and zero errors for B2/C1 and C1/C2 levels. Spatial *from* has limited variability in meaning (as it either indicates the origin or starting point of a movement), reducing the chances of misapplication. Temporal *from*, however, consistently had a higher error rate, likely due to its competition with the preposition *since*. The least problematic question for *from* was number 23 with the phrase *from the house next door* (9 errors). The most problematic was number 5 with the phrase *from that time on*, where most students chose *since* instead. This phrase is assigned to C1 in the Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus. At B2, 56% of students answered incorrectly. At B2/C1 and C1/C2, only 8% of students made the same error.

Finally, *through* was the second least problematic preposition out of the seven tested after *over*. While the spatial use of *through*, meaning “from one end or side of something to the other”,

corresponds to the A2 level according to the Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus, *through* in the temporal sense meaning “from the beginning to the end of a period of time” corresponds to B1. From B1 onward, the error rates for temporal *through* remained below 30%, not counting C1/C2, and spatial *through* remained under 20%. The least problematic question for *through* was number 26 with the phrase *through the tunnel* (21 errors). The most problematic was number 32 with the phrase *through the entire semester* (42 errors). Students most frequently selected the preposition *across* instead, in both spatial and temporal contexts. Like *over*, the preposition *through* appears to pose fewer challenges once learners reach a certain level of proficiency, likely due to its relatively clear and well-defined meanings. The errors that do occur often stem from its overlap with other prepositions, such as *across*, which can convey similar ideas in certain contexts.

4.15 Summary of the Key Findings

The analysis of prepositional errors across proficiency levels revealed several key patterns. For *in*, *on*, and *at*, errors were more frequent in spatial contexts than in temporal ones, whereas the reverse was true for *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*, suggesting that the more abstract nature of their temporal meanings posed greater challenges for learners.

For *at*, error rates for spatial and temporal uses were similar, except at the A2 level, where spatial uses caused significantly more errors. This suggests that beginners struggle more with understanding *at* in spatial contexts but improve as their proficiency grows.

On consistently presented the highest error rates, especially in spatial contexts, which suggests that its varied and context-dependent usage presents significant challenges for learners across proficiency levels. Furthermore, the frequent errors in *on* likely also reflect difficulties in distinguishing between the connected prepositions *in* and *at*, as the three are often taught and understood in relation to one another.

For *in*, spatial contexts consistently caused more errors than temporal ones across all levels. Common errors, such as using *to* instead of *in*, highlighted learners’ challenges with the spatial nuances of *in*, especially in phrases like *arrive in Prague*, which saw the highest number of errors overall.

The error rate for *by* dropped significantly at the B1 level, particularly for its spatial meaning. *Through* also exhibited a consistent drop in error rates starting at B1 and together with *over* exhibited the lowest error rates of all the prepositions tested, indicating that these

prepositions might be easier for students to grasp once they reach a certain level of proficiency, possibly due to their relatively clear and concrete usage in context. At the A2 level, however, the frequent selection of the “I don’t know” option for questions involving *through* and *over* highlights students’ unfamiliarity with these prepositions and their meanings at lower proficiency levels.

A clear distinction emerged between the spatial and temporal uses of *from*. While spatial *from* was the least problematic preposition overall, temporal *from* caused more difficulty. This suggests that students tend to struggle more with the temporal usage of *from* even at higher proficiency levels and underscores the importance of distinguishing between *from* and other temporal prepositions, mainly *since*.

While the differences between the textbooks used by participants do not appear to have significantly influenced the overall results, the findings highlight a notable gap in the emphasis on prepositions in instructional materials, especially for temporal prepositions. Expanding the direct targeting of temporal prepositions in instructional materials could help learners develop a more nuanced understanding of their usage and reduce error rates. Additionally, greater emphasis on differentiating *in*, *on*, and *at*, particularly in spatial contexts, would address the frequent confusion among these prepositions. By addressing these gaps, instructional materials can better support learners in mastering prepositional usage comprehensively.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis explores challenges that Czech secondary school students face in the use of spatial and temporal prepositions in English. The theoretical part provided an overview of the English prepositional system and described prepositions in terms of their form, syntax, and meaning. It characterized spatial and temporal prepositions and compared the prepositional systems of English and Czech. This comparison was based on Dušková's *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (2009).

The second chapter highlighted seven high-frequency prepositions, *on*, *in*, *at*, *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*, as the basis for the error analysis. The use of these prepositions was described in both spatial and temporal contexts, and the chapter also focused on how they are translated into Czech. By comparing prepositional use in English and in Czech, the theoretical section underscored how English typically describes spatial and temporal relationships more precisely than Czech and how meanings of temporal prepositions often derive from meanings of their spatial counterparts.

A section was dedicated to explaining why prepositions are difficult for learners of English to master, emphasizing how prepositional use differs across languages, how English prepositions often exhibit polysemy, and how many nouns, verbs, or adjectives are linked to specific prepositions, in which case learners simply need to memorize the phrases. To see how prepositional use is incorporated into the secondary school curriculum, four English course books were analysed: *Maturita Solutions* (A2 and B1), *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 and B1), *Focus* (A2 and A2/B1), and *Open World* (A2, B1, B2, and C1). The books typically provide practice of spatial prepositions to at least some capacity, but rarely target the use of temporal prepositions.

A total of 82 students, from three secondary schools, took part in the testing. Four groups were from the Conservatory of Pardubice, two from the Dr Emil Holub Grammar School in Holice and one group was from the Secondary School of Informatics and Economics in Pardubice. First, they completed a placement test available at the Cambridge English website (Cambridge English, 2024). The main component of the research was a prepositional test consisting of 33 items testing both the spatial and the temporal use of the seven selected prepositions: *on*, *in*, *at*, *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through*.

The analysis demonstrated that prepositional errors vary significantly depending on the context and proficiency level. Prepositions such as *in*, *on*, and *at* posed greater challenges in spatial contexts, while *by*, *over*, *from*, and *through* proved more problematic in their temporal meanings. Notably, *on* consistently showed the highest error rates in spatial contexts across all levels, underscoring the complexities of its varied usage and the frequent confusion with *in* and *at*. In contrast, *through* and *over* exhibited lower error rates starting at the B1 level, suggesting that their concrete meanings become more accessible as learners' proficiency improves. The findings indicate that generally, as learners' proficiency levels improve, their accuracy in using English prepositions also increases. The findings also revealed specific trends for individual prepositions. For instance, while *by* and *through* saw improvement at higher proficiency levels, temporal *from* remained challenging even for more advanced learners.

No relevant connection was found between the textbooks used at secondary schools and the prepositional test results. While all the analysed textbooks cover prepositions to some capacity, the analysis of their content and the prepositional test results shows the importance of tailoring preposition instruction to address the temporal use of prepositions. Students might also benefit from a larger focus on differentiation among *in*, *on*, and *at* in spatial contexts. Addressing these gaps by incorporating more activities regarding the use of prepositions into teaching materials could improve learners' understanding and usage of prepositions.

RESUMÉ

Tato práce analyzuje chyby v předložkách, kterých se v angličtině dopouštějí čeští studenti střední školy. Konkrétně se zaměřuje na sedm předložek, které se používají jako předložky místa i času, a sice: *on, in, at, by, over, from a through*. Cílem práce je určit nejčastější problémy v užití těchto předložek a proměny chybovosti v rámci různých úrovní angličtiny.

V teoretické části je nejprve na základě odborné literatury popsán systém anglických předložek, a to z pohledu jejich formy, syntaxe a významu. Dále jsou zde charakterizovány předložky místa a času. Druhá kapitola se zabývá sedmi vybranými předložkami, jejich významy místními i časovými a jejich českými ekvivalenty. Srovnání jazykového systému angličtiny a češtiny vychází především z *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (Dušková, 2009). Ve třetí kapitole jsou popisovány příčiny problémů, se kterými se studenti angličtiny jako cizího jazyka často setkávají při užívání předložek. V této kapitole je dále rozebíráno, jak je užití předložek zakomponováno do čtyř učebnic užívaných na středních školách: *Maturita Solutions* (A2 a B1), *Gateway to Maturita* (A2 a B1), *Focus* (A2 a A2/B1) a *Open World* (A2, B1, B2 a C1). Všechny tyto učebnice se alespoň stručně věnují předložkám místa, zatímco cvičení zaměřená přímo na předložky času v nich obvykle chybí nebo se omezují například jen na rozlišení předložek *for* a *since*.

Praktická část analyzuje chyby v testu zaměřeném na předložky, který tvořilo 33 otázek testujících užití místních a časových významů *on, in, at, by, over, from a through*. Tomuto testu předcházela krátký zařazovací test dostupný online na stránkách Cambridge English (Cambridge English, 2024). Celkem testy vyplnilo 82 studentů ze tří středních škol. Ze zařazovacího testu vyplynuly značné rozdíly v úrovních angličtiny a výsledky testu na předložky těmto rozdílům odpovídaly. Analýza se proto soustředí primárně na porovnání užití předložek u jednotlivých úrovní. U předložek *by* a *through* lze tak například pozorovat značné zlepšení od úrovně B1. *Through* a *over* působily nejméně problémů z testovaných předložek, naopak nejproblematictější předložkou bylo *on*. Studenti zvládali *at, on* a *in* používat lépe jako předložky času, ovšem u zbylých předložek byly jejich časové významy problematictější. Zatímco správnost užití předložek byla ovlivněna úrovní angličtiny, vliv výběru učebnice na výkon studentů se při zkoumání nepotvrdil.

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APPENDIX

Prepositional Test

There is one correct option for each item. Please select “I don’t know” only if you have carefully considered all the prepositions provided and you truly cannot decide.

1. San Francisco is located ____ the coast of California.

- a) In
- b) By
- c) On
- d) At
- e) I don’t know

2. Are you going to be ready ____ 7 a.m.?

- a) In
- b) By
- c) To
- d) On
- e) I don’t know

3. Don’t text me ____ dinner time.

- a) On
- b) In
- c) To
- d) At
- e) I don’t know

4. She’s ____ school right now but I can text her.

- a) On
- b) In
- c) By
- d) At
- e) I don’t know

5. ____ that time on, they couldn’t stop listening to jazz.

- a) Since
- b) From
- c) For
- d) By
- e) I don’t know

6. I spent the afternoon ____ my grandmother’s.

- a) By
- b) With
- c) Around
- d) At
- e) I don’t know

7. It happened ____ a beautiful warm evening.
- a) At
 - b) On
 - c) Until
 - d) In
 - e) I don't know
8. The company has seen steady growth ____ the last quarter.
- a) Inside
 - b) Over
 - c) On
 - d) At
 - e) I don't know
9. The train will arrive ____ 20 minutes.
- a) In
 - b) At
 - c) By
 - d) Until
 - e) I don't know
10. We arrived ____ Prague yesterday.
- a) In
 - b) To
 - c) At
 - d) For
 - e) I don't know
11. There's a small café ____ the river where we can grab a coffee.
- a) Next
 - b) In
 - c) By
 - d) Against
 - e) I don't know
12. The hikers were last seen walking ____ the direction of the mountain.
- a) In
 - b) For
 - c) To
 - d) On
 - e) I don't know

13. He's moving to Spain ____ the end of August.

- a) With
- b) In
- c) On
- d) At
- e) I don't know

14. He had to study ____ the night to prepare for his exam.

- a) Between
- b) At
- c) Through
- d) On
- e) I don't know

15. She sat ____ the window and enjoyed the view.

- a) By
- b) Against
- c) To
- d) Close
- e) I don't know

16. He died ____ the night of September 13.

- a) At
- b) On
- c) In
- d) Of
- e) I don't know

17. We toasted marshmallows ____ the fire.

- a) Across
- b) Over
- c) Up
- d) Before
- e) I don't know

18. The crowd was on its feet cheering ____ the moment the game started.

- a) From
- b) Since
- c) For
- d) At
- e) I don't know

19. The kids are playing hide and seek ____ the garden.

- a) On
- b) Next
- c) In
- d) At
- e) I don't know

20. Walking ____ the forest makes me feel at peace.
- a) Over
 - b) Through
 - c) Across
 - d) Among
 - e) I don't know
21. The plane flew ____ the Pacific Ocean.
- a) From
 - b) Through
 - c) Up
 - d) Over
 - e) I don't know
22. We did our research ____ campus.
- a) Over
 - b) At
 - c) On
 - d) In
 - e) I don't know
23. The music came ____ the house next door.
- a) Over
 - b) Through
 - c) By
 - d) From
 - e) I don't know
24. She had left ____ the time I got to the party.
- a) By
 - b) Before
 - c) At
 - d) In
 - e) I don't know
25. ____ the end, they decided to move to a new city.
- a) On
 - b) In
 - c) Till
 - d) At
 - e) I don't know
26. They drove ____ the tunnel to the other side of the mountain.
- a) Over
 - b) Across
 - c) Through
 - d) Against
 - e) I don't know

27. We usually celebrate her birthday ____ the last weekend of March.

- a) By
- b) At
- c) On
- d) In
- e) I don't know

28. Let's meet ____ the entrance of the theater.

- a) At
- b) In
- c) To
- d) On
- e) I don't know

29. He has become a better cook ____ the course of one year.

- a) Through
- b) Around
- c) Across
- d) Over
- e) I don't know

30. The plane took off ____ the airport.

- a) From
- b) Over
- c) In
- d) By
- e) I don't know

31. She will probably leave ____ the morning.

- a) On
- b) For
- c) At
- d) In
- e) I don't know

32. The course runs ____ the entire spring semester.

- a) Through
- b) Until
- c) By
- d) Across
- e) I don't know

33. I can't tell you more about the project ____ the moment.

- a) In
- b) For
- c) At
- d) On
- e) I don't know

That's all of the questions, thank you for your help!