

Teaching Prepositions to First Year English Specialization Students through Context-based Approach

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the contextualized or functional grammar instruction in improving the writing performance of English language learners (ELL). This paper studies to teach grammar in EFL context using context-based grammar teaching approach and evaluates its impact on first year EFL learners to find the effect of context-based grammar on the EFL learners. 60 English language learners were divided into two groups. The first group was received just the traditional grammar instruction and the second group was treated with prepositions in context. Then they were given the same test. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups. Therefore, it is concluded that the treatment on experimental group caused significant improvement in their writing ability. It is also expected this study will give the teachers the opportunity to reflect on their teaching strategies and consider better ways to teach grammar in the future. Therefore, having the intention to work with this particular group in the future, I believed that such experiment would provide me with valuable input and will help me reflect and deepen my understanding of my teaching acts in the future.

Introduction

In foreign language teaching, one of the issues has been teaching grammar. Different teachers use different methods of grammar instruction. Traditional method of grammar teaching, form-focused instruction, meaning-focused instruction and teaching grammatical items through tasks, all have had their pros and cons. As it is true in many areas of language teaching, the teaching of grammar is fraught with controversy (Larsen Freeman, 2001). In traditional methods, the aim of grammar teaching was to provide learners with

knowledge of grammar or grammatical competence which was assumed to be the key to successful language learning and language use. Traditional approaches to grammar teaching reflected a view of language that considered the sentence and sentence grammar as forming the building blocks of language (McCarthy, 2001). Form-focused instruction is an umbrella term for any planned or incidental instructional activities that induce learners to pay attention to linguistic forms within the communicative setting (Ellis, 2002). In form-focused instruction, both teachers and peers assist learners who are perceived to have difficulties in production or comprehension of some grammatical forms in L2. A distinct feature of form-focused instruction is that it presents language as a communicative mechanism. This is contrary to the traditional methods that are either non-communicative or teacher-centered. Meaning-based instruction does not pay attention to the discrete parts of language but lays emphasis on communicative language in real life.

Most recent approaches to language teaching such as text-based teaching and content-based teaching put emphasis on the role of grammatical knowledge in performing tasks, in developing texts and in understanding content and information. As Richards (2015: 262) says, “language teaching today draws on the findings of corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis and acknowledges interrelationships between grammatical and lexical knowledge”.

Grammar Learners of English as a foreign language have different problems because they are taught grammar traditionally. Having knowledge of grammar is crucial but not sufficient, practical use of grammar remains a problematic issue. In Myanmar, students have received a considerable amount of grammar instruction over the years in school. The learners usually learn grammatical rules by heart and do exercises in isolation. Many of them have only learned English in books. They are able to achieve good scores on controlled tasks in worksheets and tests but the students’ performance in communication was poor.

As the fundamental goal of learning English for the learners was to be able to communicate practically, the students need guidance in order to bring the grammar knowledge that they had collected over years of instruction to life to apply the knowledge in communication.

The objective of this study was to seek an appropriate instructional method in teaching English grammar and to be able to use grammar in communication. ELL educators

need to embrace the notion that “it is not wrong to approve of teaching grammar. And it is important to know approaches for wielding such a wild, often unwieldy tool to enhance its effectiveness” (Sjolie, 2006, p.35). This research study aims to encourage teaching grammar through implementing a context-based approach. This study aims to investigate the outcomes of teaching grammar to adult ELLs in a non-traditional way by providing context. It helps me examine the participants’ performance in a different way of learning grammar.

Literature Review

Teaching grammar in EFL context has great changes. There are a lot of studies on different approaches to grammar teaching, but there has been no general consensus concerning its role as an important component in ELT. Some teachers do not recommend the direct instruction of grammatical forms and structures. Some are in favor of the explicit and direct teaching of forms. Still others approve teaching forms through tasks in which learners put emphasis on meaning. Three approaches to teaching grammar were proposed in ELT: that is, focus on forms or traditional methods; focus-on meaning approach; teaching forms through tasks.

1 Traditional Method of Teaching Grammar

In traditional method, grammar was usually presented out of context in isolated sentences. Learners were expected to internalize the rules through mechanical drills or exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and transformation. As Nunan (1998) points out these exercises were developed to provide formal, declarative mastery for the learners without being able to develop procedural skills, using the language for communication effectively. In traditional method of teaching grammar, the main focus was on the form not function. During the heydays of traditional methods, the focus was clearly on form and accuracy, and learning a language basically meant learning its grammar (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Traditionally, teachers used to follow deductive approach in which they wrote grammatical items on the board and gave a long explanation about them in isolation and in the long run, they wrote some examples illustrating the grammatical items. In other words, as Long (1991) maintains in traditional approach, focus revolves around forms in isolation.

2 Meaning-Focused Instruction

Krashen (1982) claims that conscious knowledge of grammatical rules even well-learned, well-practiced, may not lead to acquisition. He argues that even competent second language performers have conscious control of very few rules, if any. To espouse his claim, Krashen cited Prabhus' five-year procedural or communicational teaching project (1979-1984). The thrust of the project was that: "Form is best learnt when learners' attention is on meaning". His initiative work commenced a new and courageous attempt in teaching language without any conscious focus on forms. The proponents of this approach for teaching language forms contend that ELT should be largely concerned with providing learners with communicative opportunities in the form of tasks or activities for practicing the language.

3 Behaviorist theory

According to the Behaviorist theory, it is based on behavioral habits and the assumption that repetition of behaviors and reinforcement will lead to mastery of the fixed knowledge that is received from the outside environment (Hanley, 1994; Moore, 2011; Semple, 2000). It assumes that learning is a straight-forward enterprise that can be achieved through imitation (Del Valle-Gaster, 2006), p.15). Advocates of this philosophy view the world as a body of facts that are transmitted, in this case, through the teacher to students. And students are expected to demonstrate absorbance of these facts through replicating it in their behavior. In this theory, learners are viewed as empty vessels that are filled with the knowledge that is received through the instructor (Lefrancois, 2011, Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996; Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Students demonstrate learning through imitation of the instructor's behavior (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Through this school of thought, the students' absorbed knowledge is also measured through evaluation of exams (Forrester & Jantzie, n.d.).

4 Constructivist theory

According to Constructivist theory (Morphew, 2000), it is based on inquiry teaching and learning. In this theory, learning is believed to occur through discovery and experimenting with facts (Leonard, 2002). Constructivists advocate the notion that learners build knowledge of new things by relating it to their own experiences. Thus, this theory accounts for the prior knowledge of the learner and it differentiates between students' needs

(Morphew, 2000; Semple, 2000). In this theory, teachers are coaches or facilitators who guide the students to acquire knowledge (Hanley, 1994). The Constructivist theory, as opposed to the Behaviorist theory, is based on a student- centered method and focuses on the process, not the product, of learning (Leonard, 2002). Further, the Constructivist theory stresses the role of the learner's brain and how it affects the learning process (Leonard, 2002). Thus, it takes into consideration the mental role and learners' activation of prior knowledge.

Methodology

The research investigation in this study largely sprung from the notion that “the goal of grammar teaching is to help students create an interlanguage that is increasingly fluent and accurate in the use of English structures in meaningful communication” specifically in writing (Azar, 2006). Therefore, the research question, methodology, and the collected data included in this chapter were carefully crafted to achieve this goal.

1 Research Questions

1. How much have students improved in the use of prepositions after learning with the instructions?
2. What is the impact of context-based approach and traditional approach in learning grammar?

2 Methodology

Research methodology incorporates the following principle elements:

- a) Identifying a problem: Recognizing a problem and the reasons that allowed such a situation to occur.
- b) Conducting a thorough literature review and considering the interventions and findings of others.
- c) Design and implement a plan: Implementing and experimenting with several adjustments that have the possibility to improve students' performance as well as making effort to produce effective results.
- d) Gathering and analyzing the data: Collecting information from one's classroom and

choosing the appropriate analysis method that achieves the goal of the study that is being conducted.

e) Reflecting: A principle component in action research is reflective thinking. In light of

Dewey's definition of reflection, Norlander-Case and colleagues (1999) explain that "true reflection could only occur when an individual is confronted with a problem, recognizes it, and then attempts to resolve the problem rationally" (as cited in Hendricks, 2009, p.25).

It studied through noticing a problem with the grammar instruction and the students' grammar usage, investigating and applying an instructional method that might be effective, and analyzing students' work in order to assess the effectiveness of the instructional strategy that was followed. These steps were taken in light of Dewey's recommendation which indicates that teachers need to be involved in experimenting with the hypotheses that are provided through theory (Burns, 1999). In the past, it has been suggested that disregarding practitioners' judgment can affect the worthiness of any theory (Fishman & McCarthy, 2000). Thus, the research allows for teachers' professional growth through reflecting on acts and suggesting possible adjustments and improvements for instruction (Ferrance, 2000). Finally, since this research takes into account both the research evidence that has been previously provided by others as well as initiates action (Dick, 2000),

3 Participants

This study took place at YUFL. During the first session of this study 60 students were given a test on grammar, preposition. The participants had all received a considerable amount of traditional grammar instruction in the past and were considered at the pre-intermediate level of English Language acquisition. It was predicted that they had experienced the traditional English grammar instruction for a considerable amount of time;. At the beginning of the intervention, the participants were asked some questions about their language learning experiences in class to provide contextual data and to generate an understanding of the subjects' past experiences of learning English grammar.

The questions highlighted the subjects' attitudes, beliefs, and preferences towards fruitful ways to potentially improve their English and were directly related to serve the rationale of this study. The answers to the questions served as valuable contextual support for this study. Such step was taken to assure the accuracy of the students' responses

Through these questions, students expressed interesting opinions that basically conflicted with the type of grammar instruction they received before the intervention. In the survey, the participants were asked how they have learned English grammar in the past. All 60 students indicated that they learned grammar through rule memorization, indicating a traditional grammar approach. However, the survey responses indicated that these participants would prefer to learn English grammar in a practical manner. Interestingly, none of the participants indicated their preference is learning English grammar not by memory. This desire was also expressed through our classroom discussions. The majority of the participants stated that, despite their many years of learning grammar, they failed to apply this knowledge when speaking or writing. Despite the fact that about 30% of the participants claimed that the grammar rules that they received in a traditional approach seemed partly beneficial for them and somewhat helped in improving their English speaking and writing abilities, they clearly explained in discussions that this knowledge was not enough to neither speak nor write effectively. Therefore, it can be concluded that all 60 participants stated that memorizing grammar rules and practicing these rules through closed exercises was neither preferred nor effective. Through our class discussions and the survey responses, the majority of students also indicated that they would like to study more English grammar; however, they desired a non-traditional approach. In the question the students' were asked, "How would you like to learn English grammar?" All 60 students answered "learning the rules with sample sentences" or "building a sentence after a given pattern." All the participants have received grammar lessons for a considerable amount of time. However, when asked to estimate their written English performance, none of the participants said "very good" or even "good"! In fact, two of the five students chose poor while the remaining others said "average." Despite the participants' high expectations of grammar and their realization of the importance of learning the structure of English on their language growth, uncertainty of how grammar will help improve their practical use of language especially in writing throughout our discussions

4 Data Collection

The instructional portion of this study lasted three periods of 50 minutes. All 60 participants were given a test on grammar prepositions (Appendix 2). Throughout these three periods, 30 subjects were instructed to learn grammar using definitions and of

grammar concepts. The other 30 were given instructions using activities known as context-based rules approach. After receiving contextualized grammar instruction, the subjects applied the concepts in practice activities that directly related to the addressed grammar concepts.

After three weeks' learning prepositions in class, both the error and correct use of prepositions were analyzed for two reasons. Firstly, to recognize the development that may occur on the participants' performance. Secondly, it was hypothesized that this data would provide insights into students' experimenting processes. The correct usage count would indicate that the student had recognized the grammar mistakes and has begun to take action by fixing the addressed grammatical errors.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the Grammar-in-Context approach, both contextual support data and primary data sources were collected in this study. The contextual support data were the ELL's Language Learning Experiences responses and the researcher's observations. The purpose of the questions was to get information about their past experience and their preferences of learning grammar. In order to assess the effectiveness of the context-based grammar approach on the participants' use of preposition, both traditional approach support data and context-based grammar approach support data were collected in this study. The contextual support data were the language learning experiences responses and the discussion in the class. The primary data source was the test on preposition to two groups of 30 participants before the teaching process. The purpose of the test was to get the information of the knowledge of the participants of these two groups

In order to distinguish the impact of the context-based grammar approach compared with traditional approach implemented intervention on the subjects' performance. This study included three phases. A pre-assessment phase, a post- assessment phase and the comparison of these two approaches. The material that was gathered in these three stages was divided as followed:

- a) Pre-assessment data: Survey responses, the pre-test to two groups .
- b) Post- assessment data: a post-test to two groups
- c) Comparison of the results these two approaches

Two lists of common grammatical correct use of preposition in pre-test. The first list addresses common grammatical correct use of preposition of the first group and the

second list includes common grammatical correct use of preposition of the first group. The two mentioned lists indicate students' knowledge of prepositions before studying. After studying with two different approaches, the same test was given to these two groups and two results were compared. To get the data of the improvement of these two groups, the results of the pre-test and the post-test. It led the effectiveness of these two different approaches.

At first, the components of the language learning experiences were discussed and clarified. To get the entry behavior of all participants were given a test on prepositions that they were asked to complete the paragraphs with 20 prepositions. The students were divided into two groups so that each group has 30 each. Next, at the end of the first session, the students' work was analyzed in order to determine the students' knowledge before learning.

Activity 1: Student-generated corpus data

Activity 2: Illustrating *in, on, at* with gestures and simple diagrams

Activity 3: Office and living room

Activity 4: Hands tied

5 Data Analysis

In order to provide valuable insights on the participants' performance during these sessions, I chose to employ a quantitative content analysis on the data. The quantitative analysis, demonstrated in the frequency count of the use of prepositions by the two groups of 30 participants in the two tests was used to show the impact of the context-based grammar approach on the participants' performance in a numeric form. The purpose of employing such rubric was to provide a more vivid picture of whether this intervention had an impact on the overall quality of the participants' performance or not. .

Within quantitative content analysis, there are two common approaches: conceptual content analysis and relational content analysis (Wilson, 2011). For the purpose of this study the analysis was conducted. In this paper, the analysis method was implemented through calculating the frequency of the errors and correct usage of prepositions. This method was also employed to draw inferences and to develop interpretations of the results in the discussion section. The quantitative data analysis in this study was conducted in the following manner. First, the use of the prepositions over the three phases (pre-assessment , post assessment and the comparative analysis of two groups) of data. These examinations included a frequency count of both the incorrect and correct usage of prepositions. The calculating was done manually by thoroughly reading each text and locating and counting the grammar use of the prepositions.

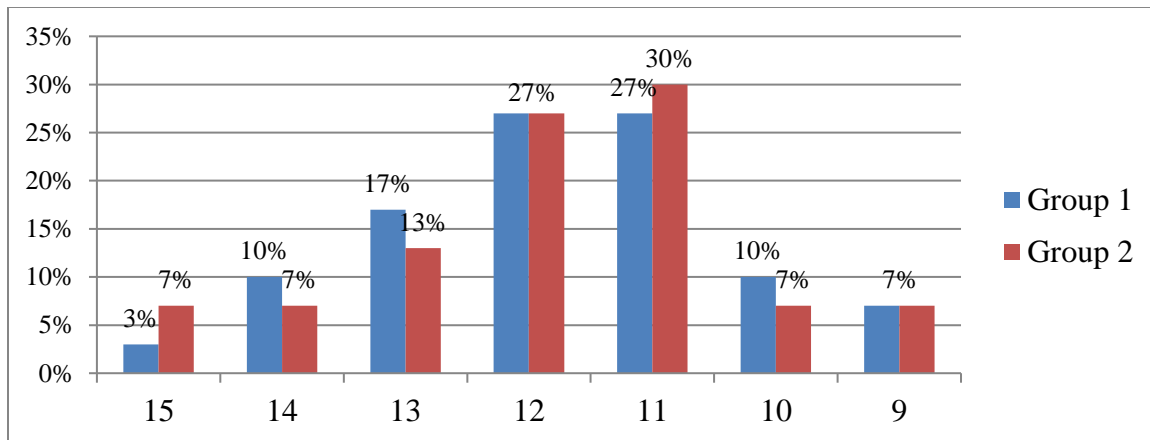


Table 1. Students' scores in pre-test

The results in table 1 show the knowledge of prepositions of Group I and Group II in pre-test. It indicates that the range of scores is not much different.

The results in the post-test that includes 20 items are as in Table 2.

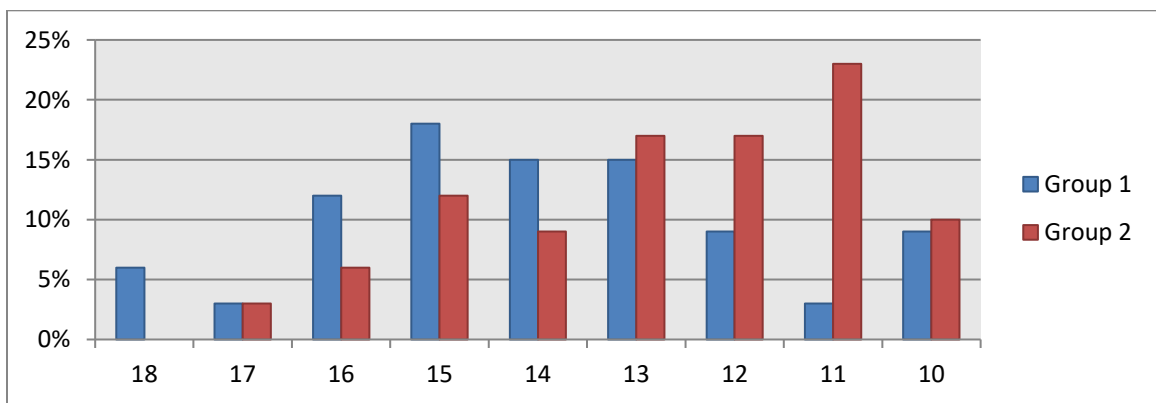


Table 2 Students' scores in post-test

Remarkably, the results in table 2 show a dramatic development in students' correct use of prepositions. Compared with the results of two groups in post-test, the performance of Group I is dramatically better than those of Group II. Concerned with test items, 6% of the students in Group 1 got 18 items correct but no one in Group II got 18 items correct. 3% of the students in Group I and Group II got 17 items correct, 12% in Group I and 6% in Group II got 16 items

correct, 18% in Group I and 12% in Group II got 15 items correct, 14% in Group I and 9% in Group II got 14 items correct, 15% in Group I and 17% in Group II got 13 items correct, 9% in Group I and 17% in Group II got 12 items correct, 3% in Group I and 23% in Group II got 11 items correct, 3% in Group I and Group II got 10 items correct.

As indicated above, the participants' performance has improved in the use of prepositions after learning in both approaches, traditional approach and context-based approach. However, the first group who learnt grammar in context-based approach participating in different activities performed dramatically better than the second group who learnt with traditional method

Findings and Discussion

The overall results of this study demonstrated the positive influence of grammar instruction on students' use of prepositions. According to overall evaluation, all 60 students improved in the use of prepositions.

After examining the results of pre-test as shown in Table 1 and post-test in Table 2, it was found that the majority of the participants' correct use of prepositions has considerably increased. It can easily be seen that students have improved in the use of prepositions after learning with teachers in class.

Table 2 clearly shows that the correct use of prepositions outnumbered the occurrence of both the stable and incorrect use prepositions. Interestingly, the students in Group I improved much more than Group II students. However, growth varied a little individually. For instance, both groups ranked in top performance when compared and these two participants managed to increase their correct use of prepositions. In addition, despite the increase in the use of some students, a few made a little growth. Table 2 shows improvement in correct use of prepositions after three periods of learning and the difference between two groups in the performance of use of prepositions adopting two different approaches.

From the results of two tests, it can be said that the Context-based approach is more effective than the traditional method in learning grammar. Based on the responses to the questions during discussion in the class, they prefer learning through activities to the memorizing grammar rules followed by exercises and the results of post tests is the proof of their preference. Consequently, it can be concluded that language skills can be developed adopting various activities in young learners. It is because, in my opinion, first year students are teenagers and naturally they are very active and creative and they like new things and new methods away from old traditional things.

Conclusion

This paper aims to investigate how the students can improve the use of prepositions and what method is more effective than the traditional method. Firstly, 60 first year English specialization students at YUFL were asked some questions to get information about their

preference in learning grammar. Secondly, all 60 students were given pre-test and recorded the scores. Then, they were divided into two groups of 30 students and first group were taught use of prepositions using context-based approach and the second group in traditional method for three periods of 50 minutes. At the end of three periods, they were given post-test which is the same with pre-test and the scores were recorded and compared the results of pre-test and post-test. A summary of the participants' grammar knowledge was showed in pre-test. Throughout the implementation of the context-based approach, there was an analysis of the impact of these results on the post-test of these participants. The possible interpretations can be drawn from the results. The results presented showed considerable growth in the participants' use of prepositions. It was found that the students' incorrect use of prepositions decreased among most of the participants after studying three periods of learning with the teacher. In addition, the outcome carried a positive indication that led to favoring the context-based approach. In comparison, it is noticed the growth in the overall quality of the use of prepositions.

In conclusion, learners improved in the use of prepositions adopting both context-based approach and traditional method for three periods of 50 minutes. Compared context-based approach with traditional method, it is noticeable that the use of activities in context-based approach have significant impact on teaching grammar to EFL students. It is expected that this paper makes some suggestions of pedagogical implications and recommendations for further studies.

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Appendix 1

Activity 1: Student-generated corpus data

Find repositions that describe things in relation to other.

Here are six examples of *in* taken from different texts:

“This is the place for trainers, and not precisely the trainers you run in.”

“Several markets all in the same place.”

“Use of colour yellow in newspapers was an amazing innovation.”

“Many people knew the X-men from a popular cartoon series in the 1990s.”

“Hugh Jackman is brilliant in the role of Wolverine.”

“The most important effects will be in the field of medicine.”

(Taken from Looking Forward 1 Workbook, by David Spencer, Macmillan 200)

Activity 2: Illustrating *in, on, at* with gestures and simple diagrams

Make gestures or pictures, using *at, in, on*

- **For *in*:**
Use your hands to make a circular gesture around yourself.
- **For *on*:**
Hold one hand palm upwards, tap your palm with the tips of your fingers on your other hand.
- **For *at*:**
Stand next to a chair, table or desk and point down at the desk.

Activity 3: Office and living room

Draw pictures and illustrate prepositions like *next to, under, and above*:

1. Divide the class into two groups of the same number of students, A and B.
2. Tell the As that they must draw a picture of an office and include six or seven objects of office vocabulary (e.g. desk, armchair, plant, photocopier)
3. Tell the Bs that they must draw a picture of a living room and include six or seven things which you typically find in a living room (e.g. television, sofa, bookcase)
4. Give them a time limit to finish their drawings. Write the furniture vocabulary words up on the board for students to refer to.
5. Ask each student A to work with a student B. Without showing his/her picture, A dictates to B everything that is in his/her picture while B draws. Then swap roles, with B describing and A drawing.
6. Circulate and make notes of any problems they have with prepositions.
7. Finally, ask them to compare their drawings. Focus on the errors that students made with the prepositions.

Activity 4: Hands tied

1. Draw a simple picture of a structure that the students should reproduce with their rods or Lego.
2. Give each pair of students in the class enough pieces for them to build the structure you drew a picture of.
3. Ask one student from each pair to come up and look at the picture you've drawn. Explain that they can study the picture for only one minute.
4. When they have seen the picture, ask each student to go back and sit down facing their partner.
5. Tell them to put their hands behind their backs.
6. The students must now describe how to make the structure to their partners, without taking their hands from behind their backs.

Exercise 1.

Complete the following text "An Important Event" with appropriate prepositions.

I was at/on/in _____ (place) when it happened. It was at _____ (time) on _____ (day). It was in _____ (month), in _____ (year). I remember that I felt _____ (how did you feel?).

Exercise 2

Answer the questions. Write a time, day, month or year. Use the correct preposition.

1. When do you leave for work? _____
2. When do you finish work? _____
3. What days don't you go to work? _____
4. When do you get paid? _____
5. When do you have your holidays? _____
6. When did you last take a day off? _____
7. When do you have to do your taxes? _____
8. When did you start working at the place you are now? _____
9. When is the busiest time of year for you at work? _____
10. When is the slowest time of year for you at work? _____

Appendix 2

I. Complete the passages using suitable prepositions.

The rain had just stopped. I went ___1___ into the garden. Then I heard a soft mewing. I saw a little white kitten. It was so thin that its bones were showing. It was wet and shivering.

I brought it ___2___ the house and dried it. my brother came ___3___. "Do you know who this kitten belongs ___4___ ?" I asked him.

My brother said he had seen some kittens ___5___ the long grass ___6___ our house. The mother cat was just a stray. He told me to give the kitten some fish.

There was no more fish, so I took some rice and gave it to the kitten. But it would not eat the rice.

"I wonder if it's old enough to eat rice. It may still be feeding ___7___ its mother's milk," said my brother.

I warmed ___8___ some milk and gave it to the kitten but it would not drink the milk. " I wonder if I should give it back to its mother," I said.

"Yes, you'd better do that," said my brother.

My brother and I carried the kitten ___9___ of the house. we heard loud mewing. I was the mother cat. I put ___10___ the kitten. It mewed loudly but stayed still. the mother cat ran quickly to the little kitten. It started licking the kitten all ___11___. The kitten kept mewing loudly.

"Do you think it's telling its mother ___12___ me ?" I asked my brother.

II. Complete the advertisement for a supermarket. Put in *between, for, of, in or with*.

Why not shop at Supersave ? You'll find the cost _____ your weekly shopping is much lower. There's quite a contrast _____ other stores. here's one example _____ this : from today we have made a reduction _____ five per cent _____ all our meat prices. But this is not the only reason _____ Supersave's success. We're proud of our good relationship _____ our customers. And we believe there is simply no substitute _____ quality. That's the difference _____ us and ordinary stores. so come to Supersave and see the difference.

III. Fill in the blanks with the correct prepositions.

Personal headphone stereos became wildly popular _____ (in, on) the 1980s. It was introduced _____ (with, by) Americans who took the players everywhere, _____ (in, from) the jogging path to the beach. Today, they are still prominent _____ (in, over) consumer lifestyles. _____ (By, Over) the years, the cassette player popularly called the Walkman, has changed little _____ (on, in) features. It has become a mass-market consumer product, manufactured primarily _____ (by , in) Asia. Many producers aim to tie up _____ (with, by) Japanese and Korean companies which are moving their production offshore to cope _____ (with, on) increased labor costs _____ (on, in) in their countries.