



# Exploring The Use of Board Games in Teaching Prepositions In Phrasal Verbs To University Learners: A Study of BOP

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**Abstract:** The process of engaging students in language learning can be approached through various methods, including the use of games and play. Incorporating games to teach languages in educational settings is not a new concept, but many educators remain hesitant to embrace games as a primary teaching tool. Board games, when aligned with curriculum standards and targeted learning objectives, can prove to be both effective and engaging. This study explores the use of BOP (Board games for Organizing Preposition practice), a formative assessment tool designed as a board game, as an innovative approach to teaching prepositions — specifically on, at, and in — in phrasal verbs to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students. The study involved 62 voluntary participants from University of Innovation Technologies and Karakalpak State University who completed both a pre-test and post-test to assess their progress in acquiring these prepositions. Additionally, a survey was administered to gauge the students' attitudes and perceptions regarding the use of board games in language learning. The results indicate that the game-based approach was effective in helping learners improve their understanding of phrasal verbs, with most students reporting increased engagement and retention

**Keywords:** BOP, Board Game, Phrasal Verbs, Prepositions, EFL

## Introduction

In the process of teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in tertiary institutions, one of the important methodological tasks is to instill in students knowledge about the composition, structural-semantic characteristics, and functions of English prepositions. It should be noted that prepositions, as a distinct lexico-grammatical class of function words, exist and are actively used in all Indo-European languages, including English. However, for learners whose native languages do not have prepositions—such as Uzbek and Karakalpak—mastering this aspect of English presents particular difficulties. In these Turkic languages, spatial and grammatical relationships are typically expressed through case endings and postpositions rather than prepositions. As a result, students often struggle with both the form and the meaning of English prepositions, leading to frequent errors in usage and comprehension. This linguistic difference highlights

the need for targeted and context-rich instructional strategies when teaching prepositions to Uzbek and Karakalpak learners.

Moreover, prepositions are a critical aspect of English grammar, and mastering their use in phrasal verbs is essential for second language learners. Phrasal verbs, which consist of a verb combined with one or more prepositions, can significantly alter the meaning of the verb itself. The prepositions *on*, *at*, and *in* are most commonly used in English phrasal verbs, and each of these prepositions can have different meanings depending on the context.

Morenberg (2007) highlights that prepositions play a vital role in English language instruction, especially in the development of speaking and writing skills. Based on my experience as both a language learner and educator, I have observed that learners frequently make errors when attempting to use phrasal verbs in communication. This observation led me to focus on implementing a strategy aimed at helping students minimize common mistakes related to prepositional usage. To teach a foreign language effectively, educators must be both creative and innovative, as this helps boost students’ motivation and engagement in the learning process. There are many strategies that can support and enhance learners’ language development. Each student brings a unique background, shaped by their personal experiences and cultural identity, which they share with classmates and teachers. They also have distinct learning styles and preferences. When learners are given the chance to actively experiment with and practice the target language, they tend to understand both the language and the world around them more meaningfully through the context they experience. This approach contrasts with learning solely for exam purposes, which does not cater to the diverse strengths associated with multiple intelligences. Choy and Troudi (2007) suggest improving the classroom environment by changing the way lessons are delivered. They argue for a shift in how English learning is perceived, encouraging a view of language learning as enjoyable and engaging. According to research, students often study English out of necessity rather than genuine interest or passion, indicating a clear need for greater and more meaningful exposure to the language.

### Common errors with prepositions and phrasal verbs

As previously noted, the difficulty in acquiring English prepositions stems from the fact that the Karakalpak language relies on post-positions, which often leads to confusion and incorrect usage among learners. Here are some of the examples of the common prepositions mistakes by Uzbek and Karakalpak students. The examples of the incorrect phrases are the ones that are very often used in a wrong way. The reason of the wrong usage is in most of the cases the literal translation from Uzbek and Karakalpak to English.

**Table 1.** Typical errors in English preposition usage

Preposition	Correct usage	Typical errors by Uzbek/Karakalpak learners
by	This is my favourite play by Shakespeare	play from Shakespeare (influenced by the direct object structure in L1)

Preposition	Correct usage	Typical errors by Uzbek/Karakalpak learners
in/at	We arrived in London at 7 p.m.	arrive to London (influenced by Uzbek/Karakalpak verbs of motion + case endings)
in/on	He failed his exam in English.	exam from English (due to L1 ablative case use)
on	I agree on the condition that..	under the condition (influenced by literal translation)
	You can always count on me.	count with me
	Which city have you decided on?	decide for the city
at	He is good at Maths.	good in Maths
	She looked at the clock.	look on the clock
	Don't shout at me.	shout on me
	She smiled at me	smiled to me (confusion due to similar verb structures in L1)

The table illustrates only some of the typical mistakes that Uzbek and Karakalpak language learners make while learning English. Because these languages do not use prepositions but instead rely on agglutinative case endings like *-dain* Uzbek and Karakalpak for location, learners often over generalize or translate word-for-word from their native language without understanding English usage norm.

### Games as a pedagogical tool to teach language

The role of games in language education has been recognized as a powerful tool for increasing student engagement, providing opportunities for authentic language use, and enhancing retention. This study investigates the potential of using BOP, a board game designed to teach phrasal verbs containing *on*, *at*, and *in*, as an alternative to traditional grammar instruction. Specifically, it seeks to explore how a game-based approach can improve second language learners' understanding and application of these prepositions in phrasal verbs.

According to Brown and Vaughan (2009), playing games is a fundamental human activity that shapes cognitive development, stimulates imagination, and revitalizes emotional well-being. Their research emphasizes that incorporating playful elements – such as games – into learning environments can significantly enhance engagement, creativity, and motivation. In language education, games not only make the learning process enjoyable

but also create opportunities for authentic interaction, experimentation, and deeper cognitive processing, thereby fostering more meaningful and lasting learning experiences.

Willis (1996) emphasize that games serve as effective pedagogical tools, as they provide learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication while using the target language to achieve specific goals. Games naturally foster interaction, collaboration, and learner motivation, all of which are essential for language acquisition. By integrating games into classroom tasks, educators can create an authentic and dynamic learning environment that supports both fluency and accuracy in language use. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (2006) highlight that games are a powerful tool in language learning, offering meaningful and enjoyable opportunities to practice all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Their work shows that games can be effectively integrated into various stages of instruction, from controlled exercises to free communication, thereby supporting a range of learning styles and increasing student motivation. By fostering active engagement and interaction, games help create a dynamic classroom environment that enhances both language proficiency and learner confidence.

One of the games that involves learners into collaborative work and does not require a lot of preparations is a board game. Klayman (2023) underscores that board games contribute significantly to people's social and emotional development by fostering essential interpersonal skills such as patience, turn-taking, problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability. She notes that a structured gameplay, not only teaches to navigate social dynamics but also develops the emotional resilience necessary for effective communication and cooperation in both educational and everyday settings.

### **BOP (Board games for Organizing Preposition practice)**

BOP(Appendix 1) is a portable and easy to play game designed specifically to practice the usage of phrasal verbs and prepositional phrases. It functions both as a means of formative assessment and a teaching tool. Students improve their performance and assessed as they are going through the process of learning. Assessment is done continuously and it helps the teacher to monitor students' progress and plan future strategies to strengthen students' weaknesses.

The format of the game makes students feel less anxious and threatened since it does not assess them in a formal manner. They take turns and roll the dice to play and answer questions. The unique feature of this game is that BOP is designed taking into consideration the university syllabus for EFL and ESP learners. It covers the topics that are most challenging and allows learning selected language items simultaneously. .

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The study included 62 voluntary participants who were enrolled in an intermediate-level university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses from Karakalpak State University and University of Innovation Technologies. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years, 48 girls and 14 boys. Considerable predominance of the girls who took part in the study was observed. The

cohort was diverse, with learners from multilingual backgrounds and differing levels of proficiency in English. All the participants had studied English for a minimum of three years, however, in average the level proficiency is in average B1. While some students had a solid grasp of basic grammar, others struggled with the subtleties of prepositional usage in phrasal verbs.

## Procedure

This study followed a pre-test/post-test design, with a game-based intervention in between. The participants were tested on their understanding of phrasal verbs that used *on*, *at*, and *in* both before and after playing the BOP board game. The procedure consisted of the following steps:

### 1. Pre-test

The pre-test (Appendix 2) was designed to assess participants' initial knowledge of phrasal verbs containing *on*, *at*, and *in*. It included multiple-choice questions, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank exercises. The test aimed to gauge students' ability to identify, form, and use phrasal verbs in context.

### 2. Intervention (BOP Board Game)

After completing the pre-test, students played the BOP board game, which focuses on using phrasal verbs with *on*, *at*, and *in*. The game was structured to encourage interaction and repetition, with each turn requiring students to form sentences, identify correct prepositions, and engage with other players in competitive and cooperative challenges. By using the game, students were encouraged to apply the prepositions *on*, *at*, and *in* in different contexts, reinforcing their understanding through active participation. BOP was played once a week for one month during the grammar classes in EFL and ESP courses with the focus on prepositions.

The game included different levels of difficulty, with challenges such as:

- Matching phrasal verbs to their definitions.
- Completing sentences with the appropriate preposition.
- Creating original sentences using target phrasal verbs.

### 3. Post-test

Following several rounds of the game, the students were asked to complete a post-test (Appendix 3) identical in structure to the pre-test. The post-test measured the improvement in their ability to identify, form, and use phrasal verbs with the prepositions *on*, *at*, and *in*. Students' post-test results were compared to their pre-test scores to evaluate progress.

### 4. Survey

After completing the post-test, participants filled out a survey that assessed their attitudes toward the game and its effectiveness in enhancing their understanding of phrasal verbs. The survey focused on the enjoyment of the game, its perceived effectiveness, and students' confidence in using *on*, *at*, and *in* in sentences.

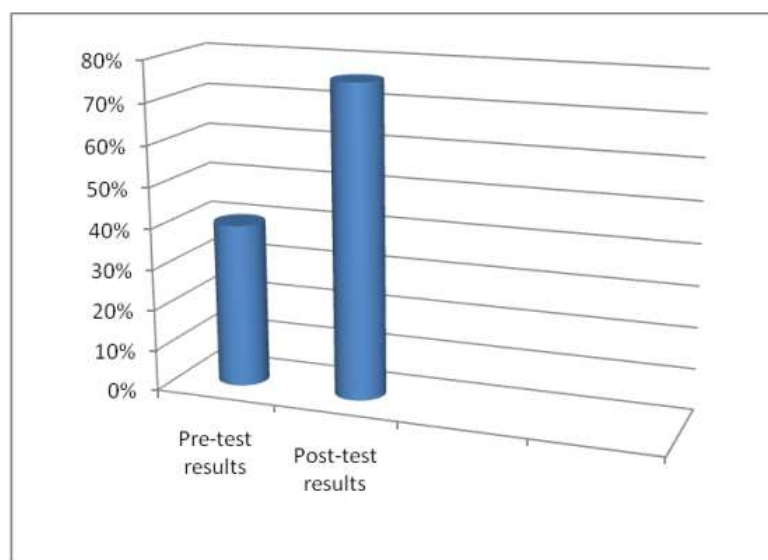
## Results and Discussion

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using paired sample t-tests to measure the significance of the improvement in students' scores. A thematic

analysis was conducted on the survey responses to identify trends in students' perceptions of the game-based learning experience. Results from the pre-test and post-test were compared to determine the extent to which BOP helped students improve their understanding of phrasal verbs with the target prepositions. In Table 2 and Figure 1, it can be seen that there was a statistically significant increase in scores from the pre-test (M = 37.90%, SD = 13.20) to the post-test (M = 75.97%, SD = 17.03,  $t(61) = 12.31, p < 0.00001$ ). These results suggest that the intervention had a significant positive effect on participants' performance and BOP can improve students' language learning.

**Table 2.** Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre- and Post-tests

	Pre-test	Post-test
<b>Mean</b>	37.90%	75.97%
<b>Standard deviation</b>	13.20	17.03



**Figure 1.** The results of pre and post tests

The results of the post survey in tables 3.1-3.10 suggest that most of the respondents believed that BOP can help them to improve preposition acquisition. Most of them stated that the board game helped to feel more confident since of student-centered nature of the game. They also assumed that board games can assist to improve other language skills such as vocabulary, listening and speaking.

**Question #1 How enjoyable was the board game as a learning activity? The aim of the question was to identify the students' experience of utilizing BOP. The results showed that all 62 learners, it is 100%, very enjoyed playing the game.**

**Table 3.** Students' perception about BOP

How enjoyable was the board game as a learning activity	Numbers	Percentage
Not enjoyable at all	0	0
Slightly enjoyable	0	0
Moderately enjoyable	0	0
Enjoyable	0	0
Very enjoyable	62	100%

**Question #2 To what extent did you feel that the game helped you understand phrasal verbs using *on, at, and in*?**

As it can be seen from the table 55 (89%) students find BOP very helpful to understand the correct usage of the prepositions In/At/On in phrasal verbs. 7 (11%) respondents think that it was helpful.

**Table 4.** The impact of BOP to phrasal verbs acquisition

To what extent did you feel that the game helped you understand phrasal verbs using <i>on, at, and in</i> ?	Numbers	Percentage
Not helpful	0	0
Slightly helpful	0	0
Moderately helpful	0	0
Helpful	7	11%
Very helpful	55	89%

**Question #3 Did you feel more confident using *on, at, and in* in sentences after playing the BOP game?**

The question aimed to evaluate students’ confidence in using the prepositions **on, at, and in** after participating in the BOP board game activity. Based on the collected responses, the majority of participants reported an increase in confidence when constructing sentences with these prepositions. Out of 62 participants, 42 students indicated that they felt very confident, 14 stated they are confident, while 6 students are moderately confident in utilizing phrasal verbs. This suggests that the BOP game had a **positive impact** on learners’ comfort and familiarity with these commonly misused prepositions.

**Table 5.** Confidence in using phrasal verbs

Did you feel more confident using <i>on, at, and in</i> in sentences after playing the BOP game?	Numbers	Percentage
Not confident	0	0
Slightly confident	0	0
Moderately confident	6	10%
Confident	14	22%
Very confident	42	68%

**Question #4 Which aspect of the BOP game did you find most useful for learning?**

The question aimed to determine which specific aspect of the BOP board game students found most helpful in learning English prepositions and phrasal verbs. According to the responses, the opportunity for feedback and correction was identified as the most useful feature, selected by 21 out of 62 participants (34%). This was followed by the variety of phrasal verbs used (19%) and the chance to practice in a low-pressure environment (16%). Additionally, 13% appreciated the interactive nature of the game, while 18% mentioned other aspects, including collaboration and visual support. These findings suggest that feedback, varied content, and stress-free practice were key contributors to students’ learning experiences with the BOP game.

**Table 6.** The most useful aspects of BOP

Which aspect of the BOP game did you find most useful for learning?	Numbers	Percentage
The interactive nature of the game	8	13%
The ability to practice in a low-pressure environment	10	16%
The variety of phrasal verbs used	12	19%
The opportunity for feedback and correction	21	34%
Other	11	18%

**Question # 5 Does playing the game made learning more enjoyable compared to traditional grammar exercises?**

The purpose of this question was to evaluate whether students found learning **more** enjoyable through the BOP board game compared to traditional grammar exercises. The responses were unanimous: all 62 participants (100%) reported that playing the game made the learning process more enjoyable. This result strongly indicates that game-based learning methods, such as BOP, can significantly increase student engagement and enjoyment when learning grammar, particularly prepositions and phrasal verbs.

**Table 7.** A board game or traditional grammar exercise

Does playing the game made learning more enjoyable compared to traditional grammar exercises?	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	62	100%
No	0	0%

**Question #6 Would you recommend using board games like BOP to other students learning English?**

This question aimed to assess students’ willingness to recommend the BOP board game to other English language learners. The majority of respondents—60 out of 62 participants (97%)—indicated that they would recommend using board games like BOP for learning English. Only 2 participants (3%) were undecided, and none responded negatively. These results reflect a high level of satisfaction and perceived value in using board games as a language learning tool, suggesting strong support for integrating similar interactive methods into English instruction.

**Table 8.** Recommending board games to language learners

Would you recommend using board games like BOP to other students learning English?	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	60	97%
No	0	0%
I don’t know	2	3%

**Question #7 Was the difficulty level of the game appropriate for your language proficiency?**

This question examined whether students found the difficulty level of the BOP game appropriate for their English language proficiency. The results show a mixed response: 26 participants (42%) felt the game was suitably challenging, while 29 participants (47%) considered it too difficult for their level. Additionally, 7 participants (11%) responded with “sometimes,” indicating that the difficulty varied depending on the task. These results suggest that while the game was effective for many, some adjustments in complexity or support may be necessary to better accommodate all learners' language levels.

**Table 9.** Level of difficulty

Was the difficulty level of the game appropriate for your language proficiency?	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	26	42%
No	29	47%
Sometimes	7	11%

**Question #8 Would you like to use board games like BOP in future language learning sessions?**

This question explored students’ interest in continuing to use board games like BOP in future language learning sessions. The response was unanimously positive, with all 62 participants (100%) indicating that they would like to use such games again. This strong endorsement highlights the engaging and motivating nature of board games as a language learning tool and suggests that incorporating them into future lessons could enhance student participation and enjoyment.

**Table 10.** Using BOP in future language learning

Would you like to use board games like BOP in future language learning sessions?	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	62	100%
No	0	0%

**Question #9 Do you think game-based learning could help you improve other areas of English language learning (e.g., vocabulary, speaking, listening)?**

This question aimed to determine whether students believed game-based learning could support their development in other areas of English, such as vocabulary, speaking, and listening. All 62 participants (100%) responded positively, indicating a shared belief in the broader educational value of board games beyond grammar practice. When asked to specify which areas might benefit most: 60 students pointed to vocabulary, 40 students mentioned speaking, and 39 students highlighted listening. These findings reflect a strong perception that game-based activities like BOP not only enhance engagement but also support language acquisition across multiple skills, making them a versatile tool in the language classroom.

**Table 11.** Impact of game-based learning to different areas of English language learning

Do you think game-based learning could help you improve other areas of English language learning (e.g., vocabulary, speaking, listening)?	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	62	100%
No	0	0%

**Question #10 Overall, how satisfied are you with your learning experience using the BOP game?**

The question aimed to evaluate the overall satisfaction of students with their learning experience using the BOP game. According to the results, the vast majority of students responded positively. 56 participants (90%) reported being "very satisfied," while 6 students (10%) indicated they were "satisfied." Notably, none of the participants selected lower satisfaction levels such as "moderately satisfied," "slightly satisfied," or "not satisfied at all." This indicates a high level of satisfaction with the BOP game as a learning tool and reflects its effectiveness in engaging students and supporting their language development.

**Table 12.** Learning experience after using BOP

How satisfied are you with your learning experience using the BOP game?	Numbers	Percentage
Not satisfied at all	0	0
Slightly satisfied	0	0
Moderately satisfied	0	0
Satisfied	6	10
Very satisfied	56	90%

**Discussion**

The findings of the present study lend substantial support to the proposition that game-based learning constitutes an effective pedagogical approach for the instruction of complex grammatical structures, specifically the use of prepositions within phrasal verbs. Through the implementation of the BOP board game, learners engaged with the target prepositions *on*, *at*, and *in* across a variety of meaningful contexts. This multimodal exposure appears to have facilitated a deeper internalisation of the linguistic forms, surpassing what is typically achieved through traditional, didactic instruction alone.

The inherently interactive and participatory nature of the game evidently fostered heightened levels of student engagement—a factor widely recognised in the literature as critical to the successful acquisition and retention of language. By enabling learners to practise phrasal verbs in an enjoyable, low-anxiety environment, the intervention afforded opportunities for trial and error, where students could experiment with usage, make mistakes, and receive immediate corrective feedback. This iterative process, reinforced by the game’s design which encouraged frequent repetition of target forms, is consistent with established principles of language acquisition that emphasise the importance of meaningful repetition and contextualised learning.

Furthermore, qualitative data derived from post-intervention feedback indicate that learners perceived the game-based activity as not only educationally valuable but also

intrinsically enjoyable. The social dimensions of gameplay — collaboration, peer interaction, and shared problem-solving — appeared to enhance motivation and created a more dynamic classroom atmosphere. Such findings align with socio-constructivist theories that highlight the importance of social interaction in cognitive and linguistic development. Notably, several participants expressed a desire for more challenging content, including other aspects of language skills, suggesting the potential for differentiated or tiered versions of the game. This feedback points to the importance of adaptability in instructional design, allowing for the accommodation of diverse learner needs and proficiency levels within inclusive educational settings.

## Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that BOP, a board game designed to facilitate the learning of phrasal verbs, serves as both an effective and engaging instructional tool for foreign language learners in mastering the correct use of the prepositions *on*, *at*, and *in* within phrasal constructions. The notable improvement in learners' post-test performance suggests that this game-based approach enabled more successful acquisition and practical application of these grammatical elements compared to conventional teaching strategies. Participants also reported enhanced levels of engagement and self-confidence, thereby underscoring the pedagogical value of incorporating interactive games into language education.

Future investigations might consider the application of BOP or similar gamified methodologies to the instruction of other grammatical structures or lexical fields within English. Moreover, further research is warranted to assess the sustained effects of game-based learning on long-term language retention and communicative fluency.

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