

On the ball, at the coal face, in the swim - those prepositions of place and time

Prepositions in English seem to have one of two effects on people: either one is born to them and they're pretty much harmless, or one has to learn them and they are the bane of one's life.

Help for a learner is limited in that there are no exception-proof rules, or even a set of logical guidelines. There is *a sort of idea* behind the use of some prepositions: it's hard to know whether this is helpful to learners of English or not. You might like to discuss this approach with your learner and see what they think →

'AT' carries the idea of "a point" in time or place. Like a dot.

*I'll see you **at** half past one, Peregrine.
Yes Aunt Agatha. **At** the Porcupine Tearooms.*

At this point in time, we have no magic rule for the use of prepositions

'ON' has the idea of a surface or plane –more "room to move"

*I'll see you **on** Tuesday, Alphonse. You will of course be **on** your best behaviour, I trust. You will also arrive **on** time.*

*You'll find your aunt **on** the third floor, Mr Fotherington.*

'IN' has the idea of inside/within

*I'm going to the UK **in** October to see my son in Oxford.*

*I can do those repairs **in** a couple of days, Mrs F, no problem.*

*The Pekinese was about to eat the canary, Madam! I arrived just **in** time!*

'TO' (the preposition) usually has some idea of movement towards something/somebody

*Peregrine, you may not speak **to** that woman again.*

*When the Pekinese ate the canary, I was driven **to** the point of desperation*

*Take the lift **to** the 2nd floor, madam*

Some ways to reduce prepositional stress

- Work with a very few examples at a time
- Collect little groups of examples that have a common pattern. The exceptions tend to pop up all by themselves – you don't need to hunt them out for your learner
- Many prepositions occur commonly in idiomatic speech. Treat these expressions as you do idioms – as a chunk of language, to be noticed and maybe learned, in context.
