

## Investigating English Prepositions Problems Encountered by Undergraduate Sudanese Students in Writing

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### ABSTRACT:

This study aims at investigating problems encountered by Sudanese university students. The researcher adopted a descriptive analytical method to collect the data of the study. The tools used for collecting data is a test for 50 university students of English language, Faculty of Arts, at Al Neelain University. To analyze the data, the researcher used (SPSS) the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of Sudanese university EFL students faced problems in using English prepositions. According to the findings of the study, the researcher has recommended the following: Mother tongue interference should be taken into consideration when teaching prepositions. Teachers should deliver more exercises concerning prepositions. Students should give more attention to English prepositions.

**Keywords:** Teaching prepositions, mother tongue interference, language learning.

### المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الورقة لتقصي صعوبات استخدام حروف الجر الانجليزية التي تواجه طلاب الجامعات السودانية. استخدم الباحث طريقة التحليل الوصفي لجمع بيانات الدراسة. الأدوات المستخدمة لجمع البيانات هي اختبار معالجة لحروف الجر لعدد 50 طالب من طلاب اللغة الانجليزية السنة الثانية كلية الآداب جامعة النيلين. لتحليل البيانات استخدم الباحث الحزمة الإحصائية للعلوم الإجتماعية. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة بأن غالبية طلاب الجامعات السودانية يواجهون صعوبات عند استخدام حروف الجر الانجليزية. اعتماداً على النتائج اقترح الباحث التوصيات الآتية: يجب أخذ تأثير اللغة الأم في الاعتبار عند تدريس اللغة الانجليزية، يجب على المعلمين تضمين المزيد من تمارين حروف الجر الانجليزية، كما يجب على الطلاب الاهتمام بحروف الجر الانجليزية.

### INTRODUCTION

From the of EFL learners' performance it has been noted that English prepositions are difficult for any non native speakers. This is usually related them to their mother tongue prepositional system. English and Arabic languages belong to two different language families, thus the difference in genetic relation between the two languages has led to variation n their preposition system. It is difficult to learn how to use prepositions correctly in a foreign language since they have no restricted rules for usage, so the misuse of English prepositions leads to the confusion of the meaning of the context.

Khamua and Hajjaj (1997) relate such difficulty of using prepositions in a foreign language mainly English, to two main reasons: Complexity of the prepositional system itself in each language and the interference of Arabic. The causes of such errors are too many in number, the most dominant is the influence of the mother tongue and in the EFL. In learning English prepositions, it is difficult to cover all of them (there are more than 170 prepositions). English prepositions have to several different functions that may correspond several different prepositions in Arabic language, they differ in both number and usage.

Arab students try to relate them to the smaller number of Arabic ones and to the Arabic prepositional system. Although Arabic and English prepositions have some characteristics in common at the same time different prepositions may have very similar uses. The correct English preposition is not easily guessed and one has to learn the expression as a whole.

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

This study is intended to diagnose the problems in the area of English prepositions that face Sudanese university students. It investigates this problematic area of the common English prepositions. Sudanese university EFL students are believed to have been exposed to a variety of English language such as stylistics, semantics and syntax and prepositions which can collectively contribute to enhance their performance.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. Presenting a grammatical as well as semantic analysis of the misused prepositions in English language.
2. Suggesting solutions for such errors.
3. Passing recommendations to help teachers improve their teaching method and help their students to overcome such errors.

### 1.3 Questions of the Study

1. To what extent are students unable to use English prepositions correctly?
2. What factors are there that cause difficulties in understanding and using prepositions?

### 1.4 Hypotheses of the study

The study sets out to test the following hypotheses:

1. Most undergraduates are not able to use English prepositions correctly.

2. Mother tongue interference is a major cause of errors made by students in using prepositions.

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons:

It contributes to the existing literature in the field of teaching prepositions. Teachers will have a better understanding of their students' problems in using English prepositions and examine their own teaching methods and materials accordingly. Learners can identify their problems and be aware of the factors that contribute to their difficulties and can apply the right strategies and techniques of prepositions. The study will also form a point of departure for syllabus designers and educators in the field of their specializations.

### 1.6 Limits of the Study

This study is limited to the second year English language students, Faculty of Arts, at Al Neelain University, in the academic year 2018-2019.

### 1.7 Methodology of the Study

In this study, the descriptive analytical method will be used. Specifically, a test will be employed for second year English language student's faculty of arts at Al Neelain University.

## 2. Literature review:

### 2.1 Definition of Prepositions

The term preposition means (place before). A preposition is one of the eight parts of speech, it is a connector where function is to connect a noun or pronoun to another word in a sentence. It also shows how a noun or pronoun is related to the other words

A preposition can never stand alone it must always be contained with a phrase called prepositional phrase.

More often, a preposition shows relationship of direction, location and time. Scholars and writers defined prepositions from different points of view:

Quirk et al (1993: 207) state that "preposition expresses a relationship between entities: it indicates a relationship in space (between one object and another). Quirk and Greenbaum (2000: 49) state that "a preposition expresses a relationship between two entities: One being represented by the prepositional complement of the various types of relational meaning, those of place and time one the most preeminent and easy to identify".

Cowan (1983: 281) when regarded prepositions as a group of words that indicate relationship between the object of preposition and some other words in the sentence.

Wren and Martin (1999: 66) considered preposition as a word placed before a noun or pronoun to show in what relation the person or thing devoted by it stands in regard of something else.

### 2.2 Characteristic of Prepositions

Quirk (1993: 190) English prepositions have many different ways of classifications, either on the basis of the number of syllables that constitute one preposition, syntactic classification or on the basis of the semantic function. Alexander (1993: 172) on the basis of syllables and words "there are two types of prepositions which are simple preposition (one word preposition) and complex preposition; two or more word preposition".

Quirk (1989: 814) "Most of the common English prepositions such as (in, on, for, etc) are simple prepositions as they consist of

one word or one item. Other prepositions consisting more than one word are called complex preposition such as (in addition to, in connection with, ...etc".

According to (Wren and Martin, 1999, P. 108 cited in Hassan) preposition can be classified into four main categories with regard to the number of syllables that comprise the preposition or the number of words such as; simple prepositions are words like in, on, and for. Compound prepositions which are words formed either by prefixing a preposition (a, no and be, by) for instance; about, along, around, before, behind and below, or by double in a preposition like without, within, outside of, out of and from behind. Participle prepositions are words such as concerning, notwithstanding and pending. Phrase prepositions are groups of words used with the force of single preposition like because of, by means of, in case of and in order to.

### 2.3 Why is Prepositions learning so Difficult to EFL Learners?

English prepositions are certainly one of the most difficult aspects of English language for non native speakers to learn. Lakoff (1978) argues that prepositions are likely to have a relatively small number of related literal meanings. Using prepositions is challenging for non native speakers it is important to first understand what makes learning prepositions so difficult, this challenge can be attributed to several factors first, prepositions are generally polysemous, polysemy is a semantic characteristic of words that have multiple meanings".

Koffi (2010: 299) second, as Lam (2009) points out, prepositions can be difficult to recognize, particularly in oral speech, because they typically contain very few syllables.

EFL learners usually face difficulties with prepositions because there are not so many prepositions in English as in other languages and students try to make unless any distinction. Also, many usages are not related to the original meaning of that preposition and it can be confusing as learners are often led by the word meaning (Parrot, 2000). Lado (1961: 180) believes that "the prime cause or even the sole cause of difficulty and errors in SL is interference coming from the learners' native language". Similarly, Lado (1957: 2) presents that "individuals tend to transfer the forms of the meanings of their language and culture to the foreign language and culture".

#### 2.4 Approaches to Teaching Prepositions

##### a) Traditional Approach

The traditional method of teaching prepositions is through explicit grammar instruction. Students focus on learning prepositions individually within context, with no further expansion (Lam, 2009: P. 3, cited in Lorincz and Gordon, 2012, P. 216). This approach assumes that there is no predictability in the use of prepositions, and that they must simply be learned context by context (Lam, 2009, P. 3). Lam (2009) study revealed that students who were taught using this traditional method had little confidence in their ability to properly use prepositions, and had minimal retention rates. As Lam (2009) elaborates, "trying to remember a list of traditional, unrelated uses in hardly conducive to increasing learners' understanding of how the prepositions are actually used and why the same preposition can express a wide range of meanings". Thus, it is apparent that language instruction must explore more

explanatory methods of teaching prepositions.

##### b) The Prototype Approach

according to Lindstrombers (1991). Prototype is a new approach to teaching prepositions and directional adverbs based on work by Brugman (1981) and Lakoff (1987). The approach runs counter to the theories of word meaning which underlie virtually every aspect of the treatment of prepositions in ELT generally. In particular, it is almost diametrically opposed to that described in influential examples of the corpus-based, lexical phrases.

#### 2.5 Previous Studies on Prepositions Difficulties to EFL Learners

This is an M.A study conducted by Abu Shawish in (2001). Entitled "Semantic Problems in Using English Prepositions Encountered by Sudanese Students" in Al Neelainand Khartoum University, Sudan. This study aimed at investigating the problems that B.A 4<sup>th</sup> year students encountered in using and understanding prepositions. The researcher adopted descriptive analytical method which followed a quantitative analysis. a test was used as a tool for data collection, the sample of the study consists of 100 students, they were combination of 2 equal groups from 2 different state universities of Khartoum and Al Neelain University, Faculty of Arts, English Language Department. The results showed that students are encountered by problems in the use of prepositions were due to mother tongue interference and the careless of the students. Recommendations come out as follow: prepositions should be included in the syllabus of the university, teachers should give effort for teaching prepositions, students should give more attention to prepositions.



This study is a research paper. Entitled “The Difficulties Encountered (ESP) Students in Using English Prepositions of Time”. It was written by Abdelrazig Abdelghani Mahil, (ESP) lecturer at Posh Academy KSA. It was published in International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education in 2017. The study aims at investigating the problems encountered (ESP) students in using English prepositions of time (on, at, in) of Posh Academy KSA. It also sheds light on the causes stand behind these problems. The sample of the study consists of the students at Posh Academy. The researcher adopted a test. The results revealed that the majority of the students encounter problems in using prepositions of time.

This study conducted by Terdjat (2012) in Mohammed Kheider University of Biskara Algeria. Entitled “Challenges Encountered by Algerian EFL Students When Using The English Prepositions in, on, at”. The study aims at identifying the kinds of errors made by the students, the reasons behind such errors, it also aimed to check if they were affected by their mother tongue (Arabic). Data was collected by a diagnostic test, it was administered to a random sample of 50 students, who were studying English for second year. The results revealed that the students committed substitutions, redundant and omission errors. The reason behind that errors were the interference of mother tongue and the ignorance about appropriate use of the prepositions in some cases.

It is noticed that from the three previous studies, the majority of EFL students

always face problems in using English prepositions of place and time in general. This is in line with the results shown by the three studies. Finally the problem the encounter EFL learners in using prepositions seems to be recurring one despite the fact that many studies have been carried out to handle this recurring problem.

### **3.0 Methodology of the study**

In this study, the descriptive analytical method will be used. Specifically, a test will be employed for second year English language student's faculty of arts at Al Neelain University.

### **3.1 Population of the Study**

In this study the researcher targets one group. The population represents second year English language students who study English language as a foreign language in Faculty of Arts at Al Neelain University academic year (2017-2018).

### **3.2 Students Sample of the Study**

This sample of the study includes 50 English language students, second year in Faculty of Arts at Al Neelain University, Sudan, chosen randomly among the students their mother tongue is Arabic, their ages between nineteen and twenty years.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

This study aimed at investigating the problems that facing EFL students in using English prepositions such as with, away, above ... etc and recommended ways so as to solve the problems

### **3.4 Instruments of the Study**

The instrumentation that the researcher adopted for conducting the study is a test on English prepositions used for EFL university students majoring in English language.



### 3.5 Validity of the test

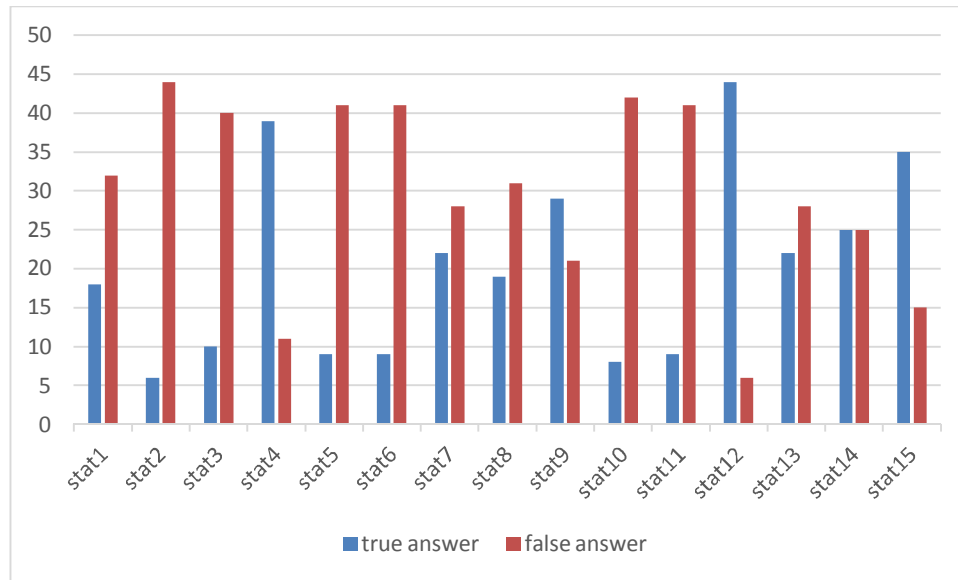
In order to ensure the validity of the test was shown to a panel of English language university professors and teachers after

taking their comments and advices into consideration. (Dr. Hillary Marino, Dr. Ali Haila, Dr. Tag Elsir Haj).

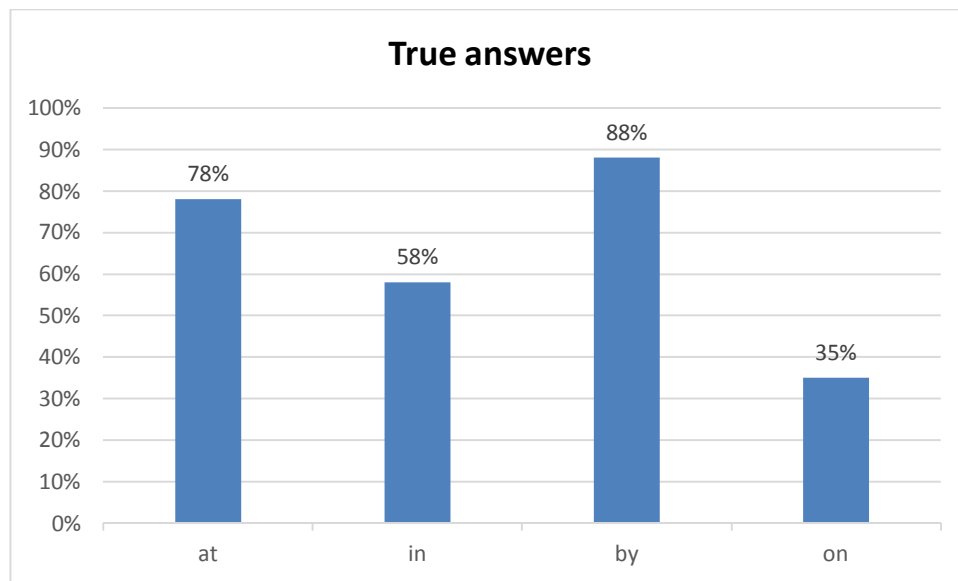
### 4. Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

**Table 1. students' correct and wrong answers regarding the test (n=50)**

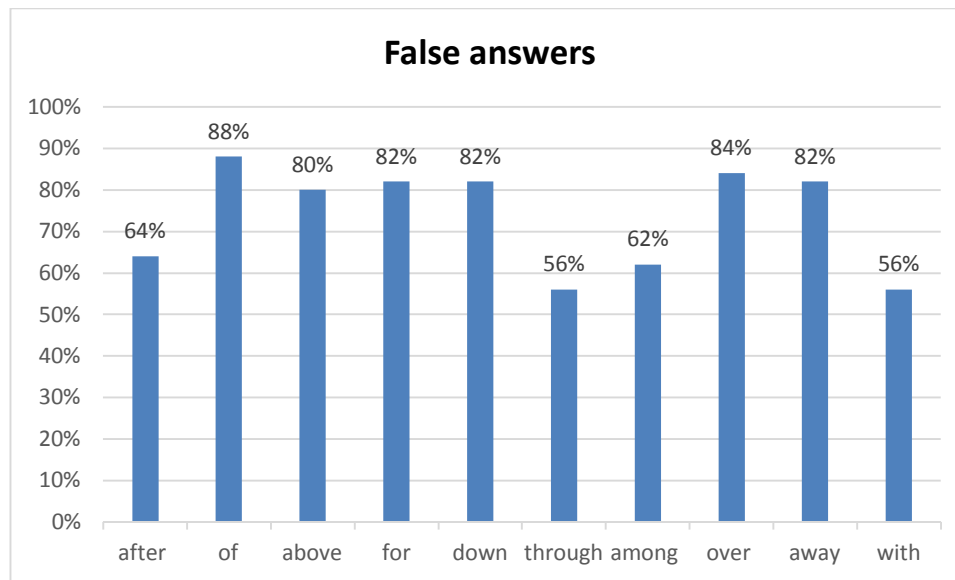
Stat. No	Test sentences	Correct Prep.	Test scores	
			True answers N (%)	False answers N (%)
1	Look ----- the baby until I come.	After	18 (36%)	32 (69%)
2	The driver ----- the car went fast.	Of	6 (12%)	44 (88%)
3	The plane flies ----- the city.	Above	10 (20%)	40 (80%)
4	Will you be ----- home between six and seven o'clock tonight?	At	39 (78%)	11 (22%)
5	I bought this hat ----- ten pounds .	For	9 (18%)	41 (82%)
6	I turned ----- the job because it was hardly paid.	Down	9 (18%)	41 (82%)
7	The cat jumped ----- the window .	Through	22 (44%)	28 (56%)
8	Sudan lies ----- Libya, Chad, Egypt and Ethiopia.	Among	19 (38%)	31 (62%)
9	We live ----- Sahafa street .	In	29 (58%)	21 (42%)
10	The train goes ----- the bridge.	Over	8 (16%)	42 (84%)
11	Clear ----- your books , I want to set the table there.	Away	9 (18%)	41 (82%)
12	I go to school ----- bus, but my brother goes on foot.	By	44 (88%)	6 (12%)
13	I wrote it ----- a pencil.	With	22 (44%)	28 (56%)
14	I stayed in Rome ----- the past holiday.	Since	25 (50%)	25 (50%)
15	I watched an amazing film ----- T.V yesterday.	On	35 (70%)	15 (30%)



**True and False answers**



**Top true answers (statements 4, 9, 12, 15) respectively from the left.**



**Top false answers (statements 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13)**

In the results showed above students seemed to find most difficulty in selecting the correct preposition of time and place. The major cause of these errors was due to mother tongue interference and various functions of English prepositions. These errors deviated from the norms of second language as a result of Arabic features into English language.

As shown in table (1) for the use of correct prepositions in the sentences it is shown that for the questions it is clear that the number of students who have the wrong answers is greater than the number of who have correct answers. It is worth mentioning that prepositions errors are found as one of the most frequent errors. The results showed that mother tongue interference is a great cerise role in the process of learning a foreign language, students tended to use English prepositions as an equivalent to Arabic language EFL learners over generalize the way in which some prepositions are use in English they do not able differentiate between them and accordingly they generalized them.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study indicate that:

1. English prepositions in general cause great difficulty for Sudanese university students, this is because of dissimilarity between English and Arabic usage of prepositions.
2. An Arabic preposition can be used for more than one preposition.
3. Mother tongue interference is often a direct cause of the problem of literal translation from Arabic into English.

The following recommendations are suggested:

1. Teachers should employ effective teaching techniques to help students to improve their understanding.
2. Students should give more attention to the nature of English prepositions.
3. The problem of mother tongue interference should be taken into consideration when teaching prepositions.
4. Curricula designers should pay more attention to prepositions when designing an English syllabus.





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