

An Analysis of Errors Made by Sudanese EFL Undergraduate Students in Using English Prepositions

Ibrahim Ahmed Abaker Abdelhamid -University of Bahri, College of Languages, Sudan
foja555@gmail.com

Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the difficulties that encounter EFL undergraduate students in using English prepositions while writing. In view of this, the broad aim of this study is to examine students' ability in using English prepositions while writing as well as their ability to identify the functional usage of prepositions in written sentences. Simple random sampling technique was used to select (30) second-year students drawn from the English Language Program, at Nahda College, Sudan. A diagnostic test which composed two questions was used as a tool for data collection. The data was then analysed using statistical package for social science (SPSS). The researcher adopted the descriptive analytical method to interpret the data obtained from the above mentioned instrument. The findings indicate that Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter difficulties in using English prepositions correctly while writing. Furthermore, it revealed that most of EFL students are not able to identify the functions of prepositions used in written sentences. The study recommended that The English teachers should adopt up to date techniques that to motivate students develop competences in using English prepositions. Sudanese EFL undergraduate students should pay more attention in using English prepositions while writing.

Keywords: preposition, function, writing, difficulties

المستخلص

سعت هذه الدراسة إلى تقصى على الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات في استخدام حروف الجر الإنجليزية أثناء الكتابة. الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة هو التحقق من قدرة الطلاب في استخدام حروف الجر أثناء الكتابة وقدرتهم في تحديد الاستخدام الوظيفي لها في الجمل المكتوبة. إختار الباحث عينة عشوائية مؤلفة من (30) طالب وطالبة في السنة الثانية في برنامج اللغة الانجليزية بكلية النهضة - السودان، كما استخدم إختبار تشخيصي يتكون من سؤالين كأداة لجمع البيانات. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الإجتماعية، كما تبنى الباحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي لتفسيرها. تشير النتائج الى أن معظم طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية غير قادرين على استخدام حروف الجر بشكل صحيح أثناء الكتابة كما انهم غير قادرين على تحديد الاستخدام الوظيفي لها في الجمل المكتوبة. أوصت الدراسة بان يتبنى المعلمون احدث ما توصلت اليه التقنيات لتحفيز الطلاب لتطوير كفاءتهم في استخدام حروف الجر أثناء الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية، وان يولي طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مزيداً من الاهتمام في استخدام حروف الجر في اللغة الإنجليزية.



Introduction

Error free use of language is important. If all that was important was to make oneself understood, it would be easier to decide which mistakes mattered. However, using English well in spoken or written language can influence the transmission of messages. As learners of English as a foreign language, students should understand the important indispensable grammatical concept such as gender, mood tense, subject, object, predicate, subject complement, object complement, gerund infinitive, prepositions, and many others. Such concepts will help them to produce meaningful sentences or utterances and create good communication. If not so, errors will occur and disturb the message.

Although prepositions are just little words that never change in form; they are pronounced softly, in unstressed syllables; they are not even given capital letters in book titles; native speakers choose the correct without thinking, they pose more problems for the EFL students more than any other part of speech. Castro (2013) defined prepositions as words that show the relationship between two words in a sentence. These relationships involve those of time, position, direction, and various degrees of mental and emotional states. Though preposition is defined clearly in literature, its usage is still one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar for EFL students to master.

Research showed that preposition is the most complex aspect of grammar which the EFL students find difficulty in using them correctly. According to Loke &

Anthony (2013), preposition usage is one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar for learners. Özişik (2014) stated that there are no specific rules regarding the usage of prepositions, and this creates problems for both teachers and learners. Mohammed (2019) states that English prepositions might be difficult for EFL students because they usually relate them to their origin language prepositional system. Yildiz (2015) in his study found that prepositional interference errors are the most frequently encountered error types in Turkish EFL learners' speaking performances. Therefore, the importance of using appropriate preposition cannot be ignored as the incorrect use of prepositions will influence the quality of the message from the sender to the receiver totally changes the meaning of the sentence. Hence, we may get a message totally opposite to the intended message.

Consequently, this study aims at investigating the difficulties that Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter in using English prepositions while writing by means of specialized test designed for this purpose. It hypothesized that Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter difficulties in using English prepositions while writing and are not able to identify the functional usage of the different types of English prepositions.

Literature Review

The Concept of Preposition

The word preposition has a straightforward definition: a word placed before a noun or pronoun to define its relationship with another in a sentence.



For the learner of English, however, are anything but straightforward. Beare (2009) states a clear and specific definition of preposition by saying that "in the English grammar, a preposition is a word employed with noun or pronoun to form a phrase or a preposition phrase". Prepositions are difficult, if not impossible to define without using other prepositions. For example: in the sentences, "The book is on the table," what does on mean? On means "above and supported by."

The Nature of English Prepositions

Many prepositions are used in expressions where their meaning is entirely different from any of their predictable meanings. Expressions like these do not follow any predictable or logic, and do not allow for substitutions. They must be learned as vocabulary units.

Examples:

It is about time.

They are never on time.

They got here on time to see the whole show.

A preposition in combination with another word may have multiple meanings.

Examples:

make up your bed -

arrange

make up your face -

paint

make up your mind -

decide

make up a story -

invent

make up a list -

write down

make up the difference -

equalize

make up for lost time -

compensate

make up with your girlfriend -

reestablish a relationship

Different prepositions can follow the same verb to change its meaning completely.

Example:

break down -

collapse

break in -

enter by force

break off -

remove

break out -

erupt

break out of -

leave by force

New preposition combinations continue to be part of the language. Example:

boot up

-restart a

computer

key in

-type text

on the computer

log on

-connect to

the internet

cut out -

misbehave

change out

-replace

with

swap out

-replace

with

escape out

-make a

survey of

Preposition words are sometimes "made into" other parts of speech. Examples:

prepositions as nouns: I want to learn the ins and out of prepositions

prepositions as adjectives: the hospital has only a few in patients.

Prepositions as verbs: I heard they were upping the price.

✓ There are some regional differences in usage among native speakers. Examples:

Most of the United States: stand in line

New York City: stand on line

Most of the United States: graduate from high school/college/ etc.

Northeastern United States: graduate high school/college/ etc.

Prepositions by Function

According to Jean (2011, p 167), there are varied functions of prepositions in English language. For example, we commonly use prepositions to show affiliation, a relationship in space or time, to give direction, etc. This section illustrates and compares the functional usage of different prepositions.

Behavior: Prepositions can be used to describe a manner of behavior. For example:

She was impatient with us.

He was rude about our absence.

Try to be courteous toward everyone.

The teacher is so hard on him.

Thank you for being so hospital to my mother.

Attitude: Prepositions can be used to indicate an attitude toward something.

For example:

She is a shamed of her sloppy work.

Are you ready for the test?

We are grateful to your help.

He is very annoyed by me.

Try to be objective about it.

Separation: Prepositions can indicate separation. For example:

I am glad you finally got rid of that old car.

Have you seen Sally? She has cut off all her hair.

He drove out of the garage in a big hurry.

Are you finished with that project yet?

State: Prepositions can be used to indicate a state or condition. For example:

The problem is still under discussion by the board.

The children were out of breath when they finished the game.

They sat there in comfort all afternoon.

Those two thugs are under investigation by the police.

We are sick at heart when the dog died.

Recipient: Prepositions can a recipient or beneficiary. For example:

I hope they give the award to him.

She cooked a big meal for us.

The police had mercy on the young hooligans and sent them home.

Topic: Prepositions can be used to identify a topic. For example:

She advised me about my schedule.

We argued over money.

The girl is going to report on the environment.

My friend insisted in leaving early.

What are you looking at?

Description: Prepositions can be used to describe excessive behavior, to describe something by indicating what it has, by connecting it to a quality. For example:

She spends money like water.

I have an article with pictures for my presentation.

She is a woman of honor.

She may be nasty, but she is above cruelty.

We do not know anything about that.



Affiliation: Prepositions can be used to indicate belonging, connecting, or membership in an exclusive group. Example:

She is the dean of the college.

I think he is on the scientific research board.

Is professor Ibrahim in a fraternity at college?

Source of Information: Prepositions can be used to indicate means of communication whether electronically, e.g., the radio, the internet, the telephone, or written material, e.g. book, newspaper.

I saw your picture in the newspaper.

I found the information on the internet.

Direction: Prepositions can be used to indicate directions. Example:

The plain is leaving for Spain.

He turned his back on us.

I walked to the office.

Time: Prepositions can be used to express time. Example:

They will be here within ten minutes.

The party will last until eleven.

She slept during the football game.

They have been here since last Thursday.

Try to get here in time to help me.

Location: Prepositions can be used to indicate location. Example:

She lives in California.

The office is on the fourth floor.

The toys scattered across the floor.

My glasses were beneath the newspaper.

Please come over here and sit beside me.

Materials and Methods

There is a wide agreement among researchers that the rock bed of any research work is the tool used for collecting data. Therefore, the main instrument used for data collection is a diagnostic test which is designed to elicit information concerning the causes of preposition errors made by Sudanese EFL undergraduate students. The test consists of two sections: The first section focuses on students' ability in using English prepositions and comprises fifteen statements for which the testees are asked to fill out the gaps with appropriate prepositions provided while the second section contains eleven statements that measure students' ability in identifying the different functional usage of English prepositions and. In order to ensure the validity of the preposition test, the instruments were shown to three university professors. The final form of the instrument was drawn out after taking their comments, opinions and advices into consideration. The test was administered to undergraduate students in the English Language Programme at Nahda College in Sudan. The research with the help of the English teachers of the colleges became approachable to the students first. The students were made to feel at ease. Then the test papers were distributed to them and a thorough explanation on how to take the test was provided for them. The subjects were co-operative while administering the test. They were given 30 minutes to fill it out. The researcher adopted the descriptive analytical method to interpret the data obtained from the above mentioned instrument.\

Participants

The population of this study is second year Undergraduate students majoring in the English language at Nahda College in the academic year 2019-2020. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the study sample from the targeted population. The selected sample is 30 students. They are in their second year of the bachelor degree program in English language. They came from governmental schools. They share roughly the same educational background. They are about to complete the second semester. Arabic is their mother tongue and English is their foreign language. All the students are exposed to basic knowledge of English as

a consolidation to the knowledge already acquired at secondary schools.

Results

As stated earlier, this study aims at investigating the difficulties that Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter in using English prepositions while writing and their awareness in identifying the functional usage of these prepositions within sentences. In order to satisfy the study objectives, the following statistical instruments were used graphical figures, frequency distribution, mean, and SPSS.

Research Question One: To what extent do Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter difficulties in using English prepositions?

Table (1): Subjects' Total Performance in Using English Prepositions

Tense Sentences	Correct preposition	Correct Answer		Incorrect Answer	
		frequency	percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1. She was impatient ----- us.	with	3	30%	27	90%
2. She is a shamed ----- her sloppy work.	of	2	7%	28	93%
3. I am glad you finally got rid ----- that old car.	of	1	3%	29	97%
4. The problem is still ----- discussion by the board.	under	5	17%	25	83%
5. I hope they give the award ----- him.	to	3	30%	27	90%
6. She advised me ----- my schedule.	about	6	20%	24	80%
7. She spends money ----- water.	like	1	3%	29	97%
8. She is the dean ----- the college.	of	10	33%	20	67%
9. I saw your picture ----- the newspaper.	in	0	0%	30	100%
10. The plain is leaving ----- Spain.	for	2	7%	28	93%
11. They will be here ----- ten minutes.	within	4	13%	26	87%
12. My glasses were ----- the newspaper.	beneath	10	33%	20	67%
Total		47	13%	313	87%

The table (1) illustrates the frequency and percentage calculated for the first question in students' test. It shows the total number of participants that got the items correctly and incorrectly. The table also shows that the participants failed more question on preposition with 87%. This means that Sudanese undergraduate students do encounter problems in using English prepositions.

Figure (1): Frequency and percentage distribution of the first question

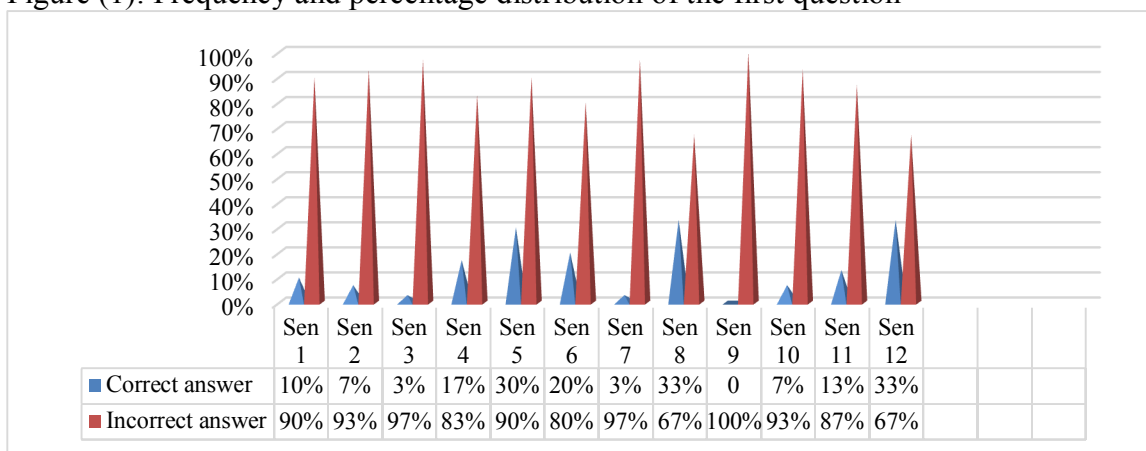


Figure (1) shows the students' preposition test scores in which the number of failures in the preposition test scores is more than the number of passes in most of the preposition questions.

Research Question two: To what extent are Sudanese EFL undergraduates aware of the functional usage of English prepositions?

Table

Table (2): Subjects' total performance in identifying the functions of English prepositions

Tense Sentences	Correct Function	Correct Responses		Incorrect Responses	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1. Try to be courteous <u>toward</u> everyone.	Behavior	8	27%	22	73%
2. Please come over here and sit <u>beside</u> me.	Location	11	37%	19	63%
3. She may be nasty, but she is <u>above</u> cruelty.	Description	4	13%	26	87%
4. He turned his back <u>on</u> us.	Direction	5	17%	25	83%
5. She cooked a big meal <u>for</u> us.	Recipient	5	17%	25	83%
6. I think he is <u>on</u> the scientific research board.	Affiliation	5	17%	25	83%
7. She advised me <u>about</u> my schedule.	Topic	4	13%	26	87%

8. I saw your picture <u>in</u> the newspaper.	Source of info.	6	20%	24	80%
9. He very annoyed <u>by</u> me.	Attitude	3	10%	27	90%
10. The problem is still <u>under</u> discussion by the board.	State	5	17%	25	83%
11. Have you seen Sally? She has cut <u>off</u> all her hair.	Separation	3	10%	27	90%
12. They have been here <u>since</u> last Thursday.	Time	7	23%	23	77%
Total		66	18%	294	82%

As Table (2) shows, the total number of correct responses in question (2) is (18%), while the incorrect responses is (82%). It is clear that the number of students who have the incorrect responses is greater than the number of the correct responses. The rate of the incorrect responses demonstrates that most of subjects encountered difficulties in identifying the functional usage of the different prepositions.

Figure (2): Frequency and percentage distribution of the second question

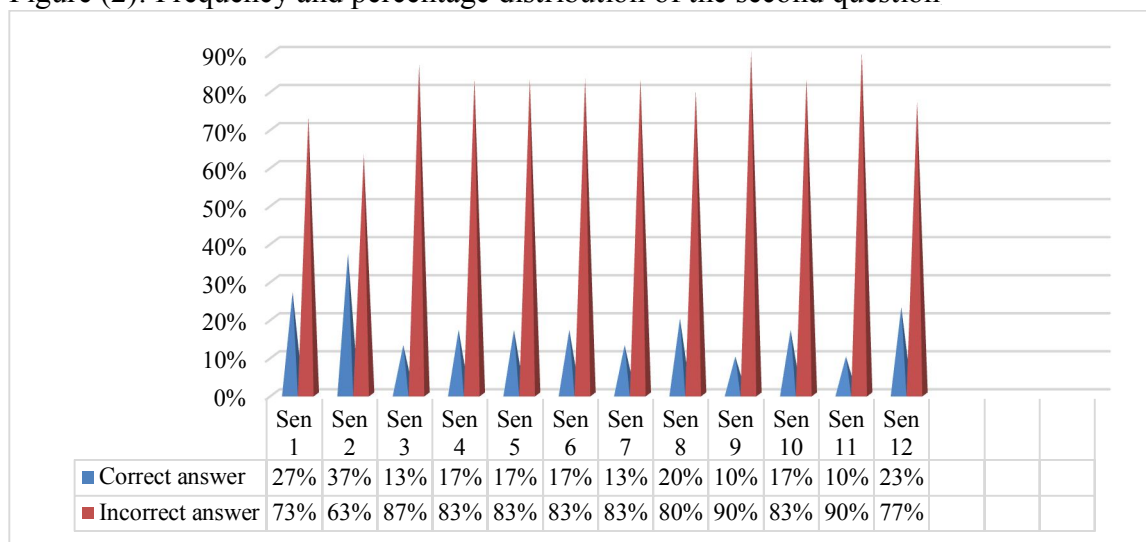


Figure (2) shows the frequency and percentage of the second question which aims to test students ability to identify the functions of prepositions in written sentences. It can be noticed that the most of the participants failed to match the prepositions to their correct functions. This is an indication of the students' unawareness of multiple functions and meanings of English prepositions.

Discussion

In the light of the results obtained from this study, the following section attempts to summarise and draw conclusion to this investigation. Research question one

revealed that most of Sudanese EFL undergraduate students do encounter problems in using prepositions since the majority 58% (15) of the student fell in the poor category.

They had problems with choosing the preposition due to the confusion of selecting the correct preposition. The prepositions were familiar to the students but it was difficult for them to place it properly in the sentences. The possible reason for these difficulties may be attributed to the complexity of the rules regarding the usage and the placement of English preposition while writing. The unawareness of multiple meanings of English prepositions, grammatical weakness in addition to lack of vocabulary are the possible causes of preposition errors made by the undergraduate Sudanese students. The findings of this study is in agreement with the findings of Oyinloye, deoye.& Filade (2019) who investigated the students awareness in using English prepositions while writing at 43 public (Federal) universities in Nigeria. They examined and analyzed the result and the data showed that Nigerian undergraduate students encounter problems in using prepositions „on“ and „in“.

In terms of identifying the functions of the prepositions in the test, none of the testees scored well. The findings revealed that most (287, 80%). of the students are unaware of functional usage of English in sentences, e.g., behavior, attitude, place, time, affiliation, etc. The reason may be attributed to the multi-functions of prepositions in English language which contribute to the complications which arise while students learn to use prepositions. (Humeid, 2013) in his study stated that apart from the varied functions of prepositions in English language, there are different prepositions with the same function which result in the failure of students in using prepositions

effectively. Another reason for the performance is due to exposure to the learning environment. The lack of such awareness does contribute to the preposition errors by students in their target language

Conclusion

This study investigated the difficulties that encounter Sudanese EFL undergraduates in using English prepositions, in the English language programme, at Nahda College, Sudan. The researcher adopted the descriptive analytical method to interpret the data obtained from the instrument used for collecting data which is a test for second year students. The study sample consists of thirty students. The results proved that Sudanese EFL students encounter difficulties in using English prepositions while writing, since the majority of the students' score fell into the poor category. Moreover, they are not able to identify the different functions of prepositions when used in sentences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The English teachers should be aware of different approaches of teaching English prepositions. They should be creative in their classes and create suitable environment for students by adopting up to date techniques that to motivate students develop competences in using English prepositions.
2. Teachers should deliver intensive exercises to students to help them increase their awareness regarding the varied functions of prepositions in English language.
3. Sudanese EFL undergraduate students should pay more attention in using English prepositions while writing.



References

- Abdelrazig, A. M. I. 2017, The Difficulties Encounter (ESP) Students in Using English Prepositions of Time. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, 4(11), pp. 214-222.
- Ali, A. (2017, The Complications of Learning and Understanding English Prepositions among Students at AL Imam AL Mahdi University in Sudan. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 8, No. 5, pp. 871-880.
- Bear, K. 2009, *English preposition*, New York, U S, American.
- Castro, M 2013, *An analysis of prepositional errors of college students*. In Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: 97-108.
- Humeid, A 2013, The effect of gender and status on the apology strategies used by American native speakers of English and Iraqi EFL university students.
- Jean, Y2011, *The Ins and Outs of Prepositions second edition*, Barron's Educational Series, New York.
- Loke, M. & Anthony, L 2013, Corpus Based Study on the Use of Preposition of Time „on“ and „at“ in Argumentative Essays of Form 4 and Form 5 Malaysian Students. *English Language Teaching*, 6(9): 128. Maysaa.
- Maysaa, R. 2014, Some Problematic Uses of English Prepositions for Iraqi EFL College Students, *Adrri Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 9(9): 18-38.
- Mohammed, E. A 2019, Investigating Difficulties Encountered by Undergraduate Students in Using English Prepositions. *Sudan University of Science and Technology, College of Graduate Studies*.
- Nina, S 2017, An analysis of preposition errors: The Case of in, on, and at, *Lingua Didaktika*, 11(1): pp.13-21.
- Nonkukhetkhong, K. 2013, Grammatical error analysis of the first year English major students, UdonThaniRajabhat University. *The Asian Conference onLanguage Learning. Official Conference Proceedings 2013*.
- Onike, R. 2017, *Analysis of Errors of Prepositions in the Learners Use of English in the Second Language Situation*. Retrieved on March 19, 2019 from <http://searchwarp.com/swa129884.htm>.
- Oyinloye, C 2019, Perversion of Preposition Application as Barrier to Effective Scholarly Writing in Nigerian Higher Institutions. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 8, (2), pp.168-175
- Özişik, C. 2014,. Identifying preposition errors of Turkish EFL students. *ELT Research Journal*, 3(2): pp. 59-69.
- Tunaz,Z. M.; Muyan, E. &Murataglo, N. 2016, A corpus based study on the preposition error types in Turkish EFL learners“ essays. *International Peer-Reviewed Journal of Humanities and Academic Science*, 17, pp. 171-187.
- Yildiz, M. 2015, Contrastive analysis of Turkish and English in Turkish EFL learners“ spoken discourse. *International Journal of English Studies (IJES)*.University of Murcia. Pp. 57-74.