Difficulties Facing English Foreign Language University Students in Using English Prepositions

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Abstract

Prepositions are one of the most used parts of speech in English. This study is concerned with the difficulties are facing Libyan higher education students on the use of English prepositions. More specifically, this study is an attempt to discover these problems and the misuse of these prepositions. This study is a quantitative. Seventy-six EFL students were randomly selected from Libyan English department in Faculty of Education. The objective test was the main instrument for data collection. The results showed that Libyan students committed varied kinds of the errors in the use of prepositions. Analysis of the responses revealed that errors made were mainly based on the function and replacement of the prepositions. The difficulties encountered in the use of prepositions are linked to the nature of English prepositions: polysemy, idiomatic usage and substitution with first language prepositions. Another strategy to teaching English prepositions is required to improve students' performance.

Key Words: Propositions, EFL students, Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

English language learning is dependent mostly on learning its words and master its production. Prepositions as words are one of the most used parts of speech in English. The same prepositions can carry vastly different meanings in various languages, often causing negative syntactic transfer (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012). As a result, it is not always easy to find out which preposition is the most appropriate for every particular situation. Many second language learners face difficulties with prepositions due to the fact that they represent one of the most problematic areas (Joe, 2009; Koffi, 2010). The difficulties faced by students in understanding how prepositions are used in context may stem from the analysis of first language L1 (Farooq 2012), namely Arabic into English. They may confuse Arabic prepositions with English ones because of literal translation from Arabic. The Prepositions System in English Language that includes components such as in, at, on, of, by, into, onto, around, and adverb particles like down, up, over , off , is quite confusing and challenging to learn for both speakers of English as a second language and beginners acquiring English as a foreign language. Prepositions are considered by many scholars as problematic and confusing not only for a language user but also for ESL teachers, particularly those whose native languages' prepositions system is different or have no such functional words that function differently from English Language prepositions.

Those who are directly involved in language teaching and learning will obviously agree that prepositions play an important role of the daily use of language. They are else aware of the problems caused by the use of prepositions. Prepositions in English Language demonstrate varied meanings in which some of them are very challenging and need high cognitive and mental work from language users' part. Koffi (2010) stated that prepositions are polysemous. Polysemy is "a semantic characteristic of words that have multiple meanings" (p. 299). The prepositions reflect practical link between items in real life situation or use in terms of time, place and linguistic function. Joe (2015) indicated that there is a deficiency of such studies on how the English prepositional system is used. Therefore, this study attempts to focus on the difficulties which some or all students encounter in their use of English prepositions. Especially, there have been no attempts to ascertain how accurately Libyan learners of English use prepositions, strictly at the university level. The study will highlight the areas to which language teachers should concentrate on, in order to help their students, understand English prepositions. The study will also provide some suggestions which may eliminate the misunderstanding of English prepositions.

As observed in English as second language situations, acquiring prepositions and usage is challenging to ESL speakers and users, whether in foreign or Arab countries. It is because EFL speakers do not possess the mastery over the language, particularly, the use of prepositions and adverb particles. Koffi, (2010) pointed out that a higher number of prepositions in the English language can contributes to the difficulty of master them. Most preposition usage is essentially conventional, even quirkish at times, and many preposition choices actually have no inherent or discernible logic of their own. For instance, it's not easy to discern any logical difference between "in," "on," and "at" as prepositions of place and location, and this is why so many non-native

English speakers take a long time to master their proper usage (Joe Carillo, 2009). However, the situation is more problematic in learning contexts where English Language is the medium of communication and used for the taught subjects at schools and colleges. Despite the fact that prepositions are significant structural elements, they are essential discoursed devices, reinforced by the fact they are basic components in producing written texts.

Research Objectives

This study aims to identify the difficulties in the use of prepositions in English Language and determine the main sources of these difficulties which Libyan students encounter in using English prepositions. It also designed to determine the types of the errors which Libyan students make in the use of prepositions in ESL.

Research Questions

1.What are the main sources of difficulties which play an active role in the misuse of some English prepositions?

2.What are the types of the errors Libyan college students make in the use of prepositions in EFL?

Literature Review

Different studies on the forms of prepositions (Omar, 2005), meanings of prepositions (Thompson, 1992) and use of prepositions (Alwreikat & Yunus, 2020) have been used and described in grammar books, particularly in (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015). These studies may have made it more obvious why prepositions cause such difficulty for ESL/EFL students. While learning the various meanings and meaning extensions of prepositions is perhaps the greatest challenge, a pedagogical strategy that enables students to pay attention to their co-occurrence, collocational, and discourse behavior, in addition will no doubt facilitate learners' acquisition of these difficult lexico-grammatical forms (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). One of the earlier studies led by Altakhaineh, and Ibrahim (2019) has stated one of the most difficult problems a student of English as a Second Language faces is the understanding of the functions and the use of English prepositions. Most learning is dependent on memorization and getting used to the usage. Altakhaineh, and Ibrahim further expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of the correct understanding and usage of certain prepositions involves intuitions. Instead, he believed that if the correct understanding and usage of these prepositions involves intuition, then few who learn English as a Second Language can gain mastery of them. Other studies have looked into the acquisition patterns of different types of prepositions (Johnston & Slobin, 1979; Tomasello, 1987), studies on the frequent use of prepositions and also studies on the frequency of errors for the English prepositions (Abkarian, 1983). All these studies on prepositions had used children at different age levels as their subjects. According to (the New Websters Dictionary) the word ''preposition ''is Latin origin. It has the noun from ''praepositier '' from the verb

''praeponere'' meaning to place before. In English, prepositions are one of the eight parts of speech. Prepositions are connectors, their function is to connect a noun or pronoun called the object of preposition to another word in a sentence (Mew & Seaton, 2007). Abdulkarim (2008) has stated in his study that prepositions are so significant for communication and they play such an important role, however, the systemic study of prepositions has been scarcely investigated both in linguistics and methodology.

Many studies have been conducted to examine the use of prepositions by ESL/EFL users and producers as a part of a morpheme study (Lindstromberg, 2010). However, these studies have been found to focus on isolated features of the English language prepositions system. This was revealed in many studies; such as (Omar, 2005). Prepositions are notoriously difficult for English language learners to master due to the sheer number of them in the English language and their polysemous nature (Lee, 2007). Lorincz and Gordon (2012) stated that English has 60 to 70 prepositions. These various types of English prepositions with different functions which are usually used such as preposition of place, preposition of time, preposition of movement, preposition to show a method, reason, accompaniment and others. In addition to the majority of prepositions are monosyllabic (Lee, 2007), and are hardly perceptible by learners as they are pronounced quickly and with less clarity than content words (Anjayani, & Suprapto, 2016). The foreign language learners will get confused if they do not understand the rules and the meaning of them (Anjayani & Suprapto, 2016). Numerous analyses of the linguistic output of ELLs have revealed that prepositional errors of substitution, omission, and addition account for the majority of syntactic errors (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012), and to ascertain whether English language learners possess the semantic knowledge of various prepositions (Alotaibi & Alrabah, 2018).

Consequently, much research yielded significant findings were particularly conducted to examine functional words. This overuse of prepositions and the under use of in, on, at, and of, off, down, over, up in particular, and others at the advanced level would suggest that these prepositions are a kind of late acquisition. The literature reviewed indicated that English language users who belong to different linguistic backgrounds face serious and difficult problems with regard to the use of prepositions (kemmerer, 2009; Lorincz & Gordon, 2012). Thus, prepositions are very significant linguistic structures because they carry syntactic and semantic functions (Mew & Seaton, 2007; Anjayani & Suprapto, 2016).

Since most studies explored naturally occurring data to identify the challenges of preposition use, others investigated second language learners' errors of prepositions output (Alwreikat & Yunus, 2020). Therefore, Libyan students as foreign language learners would be the target population of the current study.

Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach to data collection and data analysis. The objective test is as an assessment methods used with students to find out the errors committed in English prepositions. The objective is an efficient tool allows the collection and measure of data easily

(Creswell,2013). Data were collected from the entire population and basic statistics such as means, frequencies and distribution of scores were applied. Selected sample consisted of seventy-six students from Faculty of Education in Sirte, Libya. A simple random sample techniques used to select respondents so that every student has the same opportunity to participate in the study.

Population and Samples

Population involved are only focused on college students. The study sample consisted of 76 students. The sample of the study included 36 females and 40 males. The age of students ranged between 19 and 21 years old. Students selected randomly for the study because they are the individual who directly involved in the use of the preposition through the learning process, then facing the difficulties in using them accurately.

This study was carried out at a public Faculty of Education in Sirte University, Libya. Respondents consisted of 52.63% males and 47.36% females from 76 students in English department. They are randomly selected as a research sample. The background of respondents in terms of students, their correct and incorrect answers and the percentages are given in tables which divided into three parts based on the three kinds of the preposition that students have been tested to evaluate their difficulties.

Research Instruments

In this study, an objective test with multiple choices was used as a research instrument. This test contained different options and one key correct answer. The test included the use of the three types of prepositions, namely, prepositions of place, time and movement. It consisted of 42 multiple choice questions. Objective test items were developed by the researchers based on related studies. For the validity of content, it analysed by two experts from the English Department lecturing at the Faculty of Education, Sirte University. A pilot study was carried out in the same faculty. 10 respondents were participated in this phase to evaluate and measure the reliability of the test items which approved its validity.

Procedure for Data Collection

In the actual phase, a test was administrated personally by researchers to find out the errors committed in English prepositions. The participants of the study were encouraged to answer a number of questions through a questionnaire survey about the use of different kinds of prepositions for investigate their awareness, misuse, confusion and knowledge of prepositions. Tests were left with open time. The students were not allowed to ask each other. The Tests were collected on the same day.

Procedure for Data Analysis

A formula for data analysis have been used. The analysis of the data was cross-validated by checking each answered question. Data from each answered question were counted and organized.

Then, the percentage of the errors in the use of prepositions by respondents was recorded based on their responses to the test. The formula is as following:

Score = $\frac{R}{N}$ x 100 R = total of correct answer N = total of respondent

Results

Data analysis conducted to find out the difficulties in using prepositions by EFL students in English department. So the test was divided into three parts; prepositions of time, prepositions of place, and prepositions of movement. This test consisted of 42 multiple choice questions. The analysis of the findings in the current research indicated that students committed different types in the use of prepositions. The table (1) below shows the results of the propositions of time choices.

Prepositions of time

Table (1): shows the results of the propositions of time choices.

Items	Number of students	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Percentage
1-She goes to work ..... the morning. a-at b- in c- on	76	40	36	52.63%
2-I will talk to my father ..... lunch. a- at b- in c- on	76	37	39	48.68%
3-My birthday is ..... June15th. a-at b-in c- on	76	33	43	43.42%
4-They will arrive ..... 10 o'clock. a-in b- by c-on	76	24	52	31.57%
5-your goods will be delivered ..... 28 days. a-within b- during c- at	76	14	62	18.42%
6-He has written many books ..... his lifetime. a-by b- within c-during	76	39	37	51.31%
7-I must have slept ..... ten hours. a-for b-without c- at	76	54	22	71.05%
8-The meeting will start ..... 10 o'clock. a-at b-by c- on	76	54	22	71.05%
9-I worked ..... 4 o'clock ..... 7 o'clock. a-from -until b – to -by c- at – during	76	48	28	63.15%
10-Shops close ..... Fridays in Libya. a-for b- on c- from	76	63	13	82.89%
11-It is very cold here ..... the winter. a-in b- for c- during	76	57	19	75%

12-I will be in London ..... Thursday. **a-for b- till c- from**	76	18	58	23.68%
13-They had lived in Tripoli ..... ten years before come here. **a-at b-from c- for**	76	41	35	53.94%
14-He has lived here ..... 1945. **a-in time b-since c-for**	76	66	10	86.84%
15- I like to get up ..... to have a big breakfast before going to work. **a-since b-in time c-at**	76	47	29	61.84%
16- I will be back ..... a few minutes. **a-at b- for c-in**	76	17	59	22.36%
17- My mother usually comes to stay ..... Christmas. **a-at b-till c-to**	76	54	22	71.05%
18- The bus was late this morning, but it's usually ..... **a-at b- till c- on time**	76	52	24	68.42%

The result of item 1 indicates that only 52.63% of the students answered the question correctly. This means that 47.36% of the students do not know how to use the preposition **'in'** with parts of the day.

The average score of question 2 shows that only 48.68% got the right answer as well as with question 3 where the result dropped to 43.42% this shows that about 56.57% of the students do not know how to use **''at''** with meals and **''on ''** with the dates.

The responses to questions 4 and 5 are also below standard in that only 31.57% and 18 .42 % of students answered them correctly.

The answers to items 7, 8, 10, 11, 14 and 17 were very encouraging. More than 71% of the students obtained a satisfactory score.

A careful look at questions 12 and 16 indicates that 76.97 % failed to answer these two questions.

The total result of prepositions of the time shows that 55.46 % passed this test. This illustrates that the majority of the students face difficulties in using prepositions of time.

Prepositions of place

The table below demonstrates the results gained by the students in this questionnaire.

Table (2): demonstrates the results gained by the students in this questionnaire.

Items	Number of students	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Percentage
1-The knife is ..... the table. a- at b- on c- for	76	64	12	84.21%
2-We stopped..... London on our way to Canada. a-at b-in c-on	76	14	62	18.42%
3-Ali was sitting ..... me in the restaurant. a-at b-before c-in front of	76	36	40	47.36%
4-There was a terrible accident.....the Crossroads. a-at b- before c- between	76	27	49	35.52%
5-Sara is sitting..... Aisha and Ahmed. a-during b- between c- behind	76	55	21	72.36%
6-The car is ..... the Lorry. a-behind b- in c-between	76	37	39	48.68%
7-I am..... Libya. a-in b- to c-from	76	73	3	96.05%
8-The bank is ..... the cinema. a-to b- beside c- for	76	60	16	78.94%
9-We lived in a flat ..... the shop. a-above b- for c- from	76	55	21	72.36%
10- He threw the ball ..... my head. a-at b-over c-in	76	30	46	39.47%
11-He usually wears a shirt ..... his jacket. a-for b- under c-above	76	55	21	72.36%
12-Ahmed lives in the flat ..... me. a-in b- between c-below	76	57	19	75%
13-She sits ..... the open window watching the sea. a-at b-by c-for	76	27	49	35.52%
14- I work in a small town ..... London. a-for b- before c-near	76	25	51	32.89%

The response to question 1 is quite satisfactory in that 84.21% of our students answered the question correctly.

The problem of using prepositions is clearly expressed in question no.2 where only 18.42% of the students managed to score a good result.

Item no.3 indicates another problem; only 36 students answered the question correctly.

Moreover, the result of question 4 highlights the students need to improve their skill in prepositions for nearly 64% of them failed to answer this question.

Fifty-five out of seventy-six students passed question No.5, However, the result went down to 48.68% in item no .6.

In items no.7 ,8 ,9 ,11 and 12 the results ranged from 72.36% to 96.05%. This means that the majority of the students have less difficulty in understanding these questions, whereas they didn't do well in questions 10, 13, and 14.

The table also reveals that the total result of the students passed this part of the test is about 57.80% only.

Prepositions of movement

Table (3)

Items	Number of students	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Percentage
1-We arrived .....the airport in good time for the plane. a- at b-by c- for	76	33	43	43.42%
2-A bird flew .....the kitchen through the window. a- before b-into c-on	76	42	34	55.26%
3- He drove ..... the bridge. a-under b-from c-through	76	25	51	32.89%
4-They are building a bridge.....the river. a-above b-across c- from	76	22	54	28.94%
5-The train passes ..... the tunnel. a-through b-under c-over	76	40	36	52.63%
6- She stood ..... the mirror. a-to b-in front of c-through	76	29	47	38.15%
7-The temperature dropped to .....zero at night. a-below b- on c- over	76	27	49	35.52%
8-Come and sit ..... me a-in b-from c- by	76	25	51	32.89%
9-He is coming ..... the road. a-along b-to c- over	76	19	57	25%
10-We are going on holidays..... Benghazi. a-in b-to c-above	76	46	30	60.52%

The results in this table are sheer indicators of the difficulties facing our students in using prepositions of movement. As we can see from the table; items no .1,3 ,4 ,6 ,7 ,8 and 9 show that

the results are below 50%. Only in questions no.2 and 10 where the results moved above 50%. This means 59.47% of the students failed to answer this test.

Summary of Results

The study found that the total result of prepositions of the time shows that 44.59% failed this test. This illustrates that the majority of the students face difficulties in using prepositions of time. The total result of prepositions of the place shows that 42.19% failed this test. This illustrates that the majority of the students face difficulties in using prepositions of place. The total result of prepositions of the movement shows that 40.52% passed this test. This illustrates that the majority of the students face difficulties in using prepositions of movement. The findings of the tables above show that the majority of the students were unable to pass the test. Only 51.26% managed to score an acceptable mark as average result. Students seemed to be unable to cope with the need to use prepositions properly.

Findings of the Research

The findings of the research indicated that there are many differences in the use of prepositions identified in the English language. This study has also revealed the differences for the same prepositions which are used differently in different categories in terms of frequency occurrence such as; prepositions *on, at, in, to* and *by* are presented in the categories of prepositions of place and time that refer to the multiple meaning of prepositions.

To answer the first research question: the findings of the research indicate that the most of errors in the use of prepositions by EFL learners relate to the following causes:

a) The inter-lingual or intercommunicative errors caused by the users' native language interference.

b) Usage and training errors.

c) The faulty presentations of the training materials by the language trainers.

d) The use of English within particular linguistic situations.

e) Second language communication strategies by which users and learners attempt to tackle the loaded interaction encountering them.

Most of these errors occurs when using prepositions such as /in/, /into/ and /at / equals / Fe/, /onto/ and /on/ equals /ala/ in Arabic where the preposition /of/ left with no equivalent, due to its varied structural function. In addition, prepositions in Arabic Language are not of multi-meanings and functions the way English is.

To answer the second research question; the findings of research indicated to the errors types students made as following:

(a) Substitution of the preposition in for at, and in for on in certain contexts.

(b) The use of the preposition at to indicate days and items, in to show exact date and days, on for time.

(c) Replacement of the preposition in by on as indicators of certain objects like, days seasons, years, items or date.

(d) Substitution of the preposition on by onto in appropriate sentences.

(e) The use of the preposition into in place of in or reverse them.

(f) The unawareness of the use of prepositions as which one stands for specific or general purpose in the case of in, on, at.

(g) The mix up in the use of the preposition of and the adverb off as which one to use in particular structure. Also, the misuse and confuse in the usage of the prepositions and adverb particles down, up with under and above.

Discussion

The analysis of the findings in the current research indicated that students committed different types of errors in the use of prepositions. As the participants were confused while using them in their writing. This contributes to the learning difficulty to use prepositions correctly as most of them have several different functions. This includes the substitution of the preposition. Such as, in for at, and in for on in certain contexts. The findings showed that this kind of substitution occurred with both male and female. Worth stating that these findings were in line with findings' Cowan (2008) and Lee (2012). In which, the occurrence of these errors were related basically to native language interference and the learners' knowledge inadequacy of the target language, or even the multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions as following;
(i) A bird flew [into -in] the kitchen through the window.
(ii) He threw the ball [over- on] my head.
(iii)The knife is [at - on] the table.

Where a significant number of errors made by the subjects through substituting in by on, on by at whose use is obligatory locative or spatial with object of preposition [place –way] for on not for in; and on with the [item, the table] not in, or the case for the exact [date, 2nd April] on not in which would be used for general things like month, year, or place. Thus, English requires the use of the prepositions in for general usage and on for exact purpose but Arabic not. Due to the aforesaid dissimilarities or differences between the two languages, Arabic doesn't have distinct markers for prepositions exact and general usage compared to that of English language. This may lead to the incorrect use of prepositions and adverb particles. This assumption is further supported by the work of scholars such as (Thomson & Martinet, 2009) who stated that similar errors were made by producers and users of Arabic and other international languages. They pointed out that these languages might not have corresponding prepositions system. The other possible source of errors in the process of simplification is the attempt of English Language learners to reduce the acquisition load. They may be using prepositions like in, on, and at differently for succeeding the communication process.

Substitution of the prepositions of by the adverb off, and similarly down, up, over, around, and when to consider them as prepositions or adverb particles within the structure is also another crucial problem here. These crucial errors may seem flexible enough to be discussed but very challenging and problematic in reality. This inadequacy may relate to the native language interference and ESL students' unawareness the English word class, knowledge of these functional words, and multiple meanings of prepositions (Lee ,2007).

This explanation seems very ideal for the difficulty in learning prepositions such as in, at, on, of, onto, into and adverb particles like down, over, up and off where some of them could be applicable as prepositions as well. They are considered as inseparable indicators for time, seasons, years, months, places, and items in most of the situations and purposes (locative and spatial), whether exact or general. This conclusion may make the learners assume that the use of prepositional words in, on, at, onto, into and of is for all cases regardless of the purpose, object, and situation stands for as well the case for other prepositions and adverb particles. In addition, secondary school students are also misled by the presentation of English language teaching materials in the classroom setting. Whereas the constructivists are extremely arguing for the importance of linguistic input. This is akin to the result of a study by Wijana (2014). They concluded that the lack of good teaching approach and materials is one of the factors that could contributed to the problems with using propositions. Some teachers may teach prepositions to their students orally. This leads them to reality shock when they practice writing and get confuse and misuse prepositions with adverb particles, particularly whenever the learners or users can not differentiate between prepositions and adverb particles. This may include components such as down, up and over as adverb particles as demonstrated in the examples here:

(i) The boy lives up / down the road. [Preposition]

(ii) He looked up / down. [Adverb particles]

It is worth noting that these errors are subsequent to that of prepositions usage /use unawareness, and knowledge, especially when it comes to the word class type which the producers fail to realize that these features are not separate entity from the word class (noun / verb) and have structural implication as modifying verbs or nouns and, thus, continues to produce ungrammatical structures. The participants made erroneous errors in the use of prepositions in which students appear to make a lot of errors in erroneous substitution of prepositions themselves as (48.75%). Both females and males recorded substitution errors in the use of some prepositions such as [of, in, at, on]. But these errors did not seem like a slip of a pen or nonce mistake. Furthermore, the learners made many errors in the use of prepositions in their application with time, places, date, seasons, years, or items (locative and spatial). These errors may be better explained as being caused by the other target language structures analogy and overgeneralization. The students were possibly applying the rules of native and target languages where they are not applicable. In addition, the unawareness, hypercorrection, or the students' tendencies to excessively use prepositions in unnecessary places may lead to communication interruption and errors. These errors refer to the learners' unawareness and carelessness.

Conclusion:

The study investigated the errors and difficulties in the use of prepositions by college students. It has established that Libyan learners of the English language, just like learners from some other countries have problems with the use of English Prepositions due to various factors. The results illustrated that the majority of the students exhibited difficulties in using prepositions of time, place and movement. Worth stating that the study of preposition is considered as an important field in grammar. These findings implied that the understanding or mastering of preposition kinds and usage or their multiple meaning and functions are very important in assisting students to use them correctly by avoiding the unawareness, misuse and confusion of prepositions. That will enhance the students 'ability in distinguish among them through the writing and speaking forms.

Recommendations:

The results revealed the need for giving more time to prepositions in class activities. A careful look at the syllabus showed that prepositions are not dealt with appropriately. Prepositions play an important part in speech. Therefore, they should be given more space in the content of the course book and more class tasks should be devoted to explain and exercise the use of prepositions. That is, EFL learners should be able to use them correctly in order to avoid confusions and meanings interruption. Other than using grammar books, internet sources, dictionaries and the textbooks, a pedagogical strategy that support students to be aware to their co-occurrence, collocational and discourse behavior are needed to simplify learners' acquisition of these difficult lexico-grammatical forms (Wijana, 2014). Likewise, students may be able to learn and recognize the typical uses of prepositions better if they are asked to detect the pattern on their own. Their sensitivity to the language can be developed if they are encouraged to discover the patterns of use in prepositions.

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