

## **THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS BY ARAB EFL LEARNERS: LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Throughout the history of teaching and learning EFL, prepositions earned a reputation of being difficult for a number of reasons such as the large number of prepositions in English, the complexity of the preposition system, the mismatch between the first language and EFL, and the lack of rules of usage in most cases. Prepositions are believed to be problematic even for university students. Impetus to this study was given by the fact that claims about the difficulty of learning prepositions in EFL run counter to my observation that university students use most of the English prepositions correctly. Having analyzed 50 compositions written by Arabic-speaking EFL university students, we found that more than 80% of the prepositions were correct. Accordingly, claims about the difficulty of the prepositions cannot be made without conducting a holistic performance analysis including both the correctly used prepositions as well as the incorrectly used ones. The pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed in light of some frequently suggested teaching techniques.

### **DEFINITION**

All of the definitions of the term ‘preposition’ state that it is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or its equivalent and other words in a sentence. Here are two definitions: A preposition is “a function word that combines with a noun or pronoun to form a prepositional phrase that can have an adverbial or adjectival relation to some other word,” (<http://define.com/preposition>). The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1980) defines it as “a word that indicates the relation of a substantive to a verb, an adjective or another substantive.” A ‘substantive’ refers to a word or a group of words functioning as a noun.

### **PREPOSITIONS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING:**

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In English there are about 124 prepositions. In numerous studies, past and present, prepositions are reported to constitute a hurdle in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) even at high proficiency levels, (see e.g. Pittman, 1966; Zughoul, 1979; Jafarpour and Koosha, 1985; Swan, 1996; Lakkis and Abdel-Malak, 2000; Celece-Murcia, 2001; Zarei and Koosha, 2002; Piquer-Piriz, 2006; Eltayeb, 2010). Hendricks (2010, p. 24) says, “learning English prepositions is notoriously difficult and a slow, gradual process for ESL students.” A number of reasons are given for the difficulty of learning and using prepositions in English. First, most of the prepositions are believed to have loose or no rules, (see e.g. Jafarpour and Koosha, 1985; Hendricks, 2010). According to South (1996) even the native speakers of English do not know how prepositions are used. Second, the differences between English and the native language of the learners pose problems, (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Hendricks, 2010; Swan, 1996). Kharma and Hajjaj (1997, p. 76) write about the learning of the English prepositions by Arab students. They believe that “the basic and most common sense of each English preposition is presented to the learners first, then other uses are added later. The student at once equates this first meaning with an Arabic preposition, and develops a strong tendency to use that equation all the time.” The third reason is the complexity of the preposition system in English. One preposition may have several meanings and one meaning may be indicated by more than one preposition. Different prepositions are used with different derivatives of the same word (e.g. *full of* – *fill with*), (see also Kharma and Hajjaj, 1997; Swan, 1996; Zughoul, 1979). Fourth, the number of English prepositions is great, (Celece-Murcia and Laresn-Freeman, 1983). There are about 124 prepositions as we said earlier. Hendricks (2010, p. 24) adds two more reasons. She states that prepositions are “short ... words that are seldom stressed when speaking and therefore often not articulated clearly or heard distinctly.” She also refers to the differences between British English (*fill in*) and American English (*fill out*) as a source of confusion.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

Having analyzed compositions written by Jordanian first-, second- and third-year university EFL students, Tahaineh (2010, p.76) concludes that “the improper use of prepositions is prominent among EFL Arab learners even at advanced stages of their learning.” In the

same vein, Eltayeb (2010, p. 65) writes about Omani university students: “The more sophisticated sample of writing of the more advanced group ... showed that difficulties persist in their efforts to use prepositions at a higher level.” However, my observation of EFL university students’ use of the English prepositions runs counter to the findings of Tahaineh and Eltayeb. A closer look at a few essays written by the Omani students revealed that most of the prepositions were used correctly. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the issue in a more systematic manner by looking at the correct as well as incorrect production of the prepositions by EFL university students. This study constitutes a departure from the one-sided view of the students’ performance. Before rendering judgments on the ease or difficulty of learning and using prepositions, we need to conduct a holistic interlanguage performance analysis with regard to the production of prepositions. To the best of my knowledge, such an analysis has not been done. Thus, this study is intended to find out if the reputation for difficulty that the English prepositions have acquired is warranted. To that end, we examined free compositions written by 50 Arabic-speaking second-year male and female university students.. From a list of topics, the students chose to write about mobile phones most probably because all of them had such phones and they were familiar with the benefits and problems of these devices. The essays ranged from one page to one and half pages written as one of the assignments of the fourth semester writing course. The average length of the essays was 585 words. Due to the limitations of space, we will present the number of words and prepositions detected in the longest, medium and shortest essays in Table (1) below.

**Table (1): Number of Words and Prepositions in the Longest, Medium and Shortest Essays**

|                                  | Longest | Medium | Shortest |
|----------------------------------|---------|--------|----------|
| Number of Words                  | 657     | 562    | 549      |
| Number of Prepositions Used      | 65      | 55     | 66       |
| Number of Incorrect Prepositions | 13      | 7      | 5        |

**DATA ANALYSIS:**

Before correcting the essays for the purpose of the writing course, they were photocopied to serve as data for the present study. Two EFL

university teachers - one of whom was a native speaker of English – were requested to find and underline all of the prepositions used in each essay and indicate the incorrectly used ones including cases of omission of a required preposition. There were some differences between the total number of prepositions found by the two teachers, most probably because some prepositions went undetected. Therefore, we had to take the higher of the two totals. We also took the higher of the two totals of the incorrectly used prepositions. Seven incorrect prepositions were ignored because they were either ambiguous or induced by another incorrect word in the sentence as in the following examples:

- \* There is no need for memorize phone numbers.
- \* Most of people want to buy new models.
- \* Although of the advantages, there are some bad effects.
- \* We can't ignore it from our life.

**Table (2): Total Number and Percentage of Prepositions**

|                                | No.  | %     | Average per Essay | %  |
|--------------------------------|------|-------|-------------------|----|
| Prepositions Used in 50 Essays | 2562 |       | 51                |    |
| Correct Prepositions           | 2135 | 83.33 | 43                | 84 |
| Incorrect Prepositions         | 427  | 16.37 | 8                 | 16 |

Table (2) shows that a total of 2562 prepositions were used by the 50 students, of which 2135 (more than 80%) were used correctly. Only 427 prepositions were incorrectly used out of the 2562 used, (i.e. only 16.33%). The incorrect prepositions were further analyzed in terms of the learning and communication strategies employed by the students. The incorrect prepositions (427) were scrutinized by an Arabic-speaking EFL teacher to see which ones could possibly be due to interlingual transfer from Arabic. A total of 178 errors (43%) were believed to be interlingual. This finding shows that interlingual transfer accounts for more than a third of the preposition errors. The implications of this for teaching EFL will be discussed later.

## DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study bear out my informal observation that a large number of the English prepositions produced by Arabic-speaking university students are correct. The fact that more than 80% of the prepositions were correct is out of line with the findings of Tahaineh (2010) and Eltayeb (2010). The situation does not seem to be as bleak as it is portrayed by researchers, especially at the university level. In light of the findings of the present study, more than two thirds of the cup is full if we look at the students' performance as a whole and compare correctly produced prepositions with the incorrect ones. We should not focus only on what the learners cannot do and lose sight of what they can do. Claims about the difficulty of the preposition cannot be made without having a holistic view of the students' performance. On an optimistic note, this study urges EFL teachers and researchers to look on the bright side regarding the learning and using English prepositions by university students.

In light of the large number of correctly produced prepositions, some of the reasons given for the difficulty of learning and using these words do not hold water. The large number of prepositions in English (124) does not appear to be a problem since, as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) say, prepositions rank second in difficulty after the articles which are very few. The fact that one preposition has many meanings and one meaning is expressed by more than preposition applies also to content words. Prepositions are closed-class function words whereas content words are open-class words. It is clear that this complexity factor is based on a purely linguistic analysis of the prepositions. Linguistic complexity does not necessarily entail learning difficulty. As we stated earlier, some researchers believe that prepositions are difficult to learn because they do not have rules. However, the lack of rules is not a main source of confusion as it is envisaged since our findings show that more than 80% of the prepositions were correct. Even when there is a rule (e.g. "at" + time - "on" + day), Arab students commit errors such as \* *in the same time* and \* *in the same day*, most probably due to interlingual transfer from Arabic.

Regarding transfer, the findings of this study show that 178 preposition errors were due to the influence of Arabic. Therefore, it is true that the first language is a source of error. However, we should not lose sight of the possible positive effect of this influence. The existence of negative transfer presupposes existence of positive transfer. Needless to say, it is nowhere near possible to detect this positive effect since there are other learning processes (memorization, subconscious acquisition, etc.) that can lead to the same correct usage. Since 43% of the incorrect prepositions could be attributed to negative interlingual transfer, production of a more or less similar number of correct prepositions due to positive transfer is a plausible hypothesis that

remains to be tested by using appropriate data collection tools such as introspection.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Recommendations are abound as to how prepositions can be taught. In this section, we will review some of these recommendations in light of the findings of the present study. Very few prepositions have rules, yet the correctly produced ones are more than the incorrect ones. This clearly shows that EFL learners acquire prepositions through exposure to the language. They pick up many prepositions even if they are not intentionally taught. It is axiomatic that exposure to the language gives the learners the chance to internalize what they want whenever and however they want depending on their readiness, need and interest. Hence, we believe that exposure to the language through reading and listening should be assigned first priority in teaching and learning prepositions. Some researchers (e.g. Eltayeb, 2010; South, 1996; Zugoul, 1979) recommend some teaching techniques such as (1) teaching one preposition at a time, (2) beginning with the easiest and most demonstrable ones and moving on to the more idiomatic and abstract ones, and (3) focusing on the problematic ones. However, problematicity is in the eye of the beholder. What is deemed problematic may not pose any problem for some learners and might have already been acquired by some others, yet some other learners may not be ready to learn it however efficiently it is taught. More importantly, language learning is not linear so that we teach one item at a time or proceed from what we think is the easiest to the more difficult. As we said earlier, what is linguistically complex may not be difficult to learn and vice versa. A more reasonable course of action is to adopt a holistic learner-centered approach whereby learners are exposed to the language in communicative contexts so that they acquire the prepositions naturally following their rates and routes.

Following an interventionist form-focused approach, there are two techniques of teaching prepositions: (1) rule explanation when there are rules and (2) comparing and contrasting EFL and the native language whether there are rules or not. No doubt, analytic learners will be the first to benefit from rule explanations. Even when there are no rules, cognitively mature learners may benefit from interlingual comparisons since they rely on interlingual transfer as a learning and communication strategy as we see can from their errors. Brief contrastive analysis can foster language awareness and show the learners when to rely on their first language and when not to. Thus, EFL learners should be helped to learn the English prepositions through (1) exposure to the language, (2) positive interlingual transfer, and (3) rule explanation.

The findings of the present study need to be confirmed by further studies with similar groups of EFL learners. Claims about the difficulty of the

prepositions cannot be made before analyzing learners' performance as a whole including errors and non-errors in the same compositions. Further studies can compare the performance of EFL learners in the use of prepositions at all levels of proficiency. The use of the English prepositions can be compared with the use of other linguistic elements such as vocabulary, tenses, cohesive devices and so forth.

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