

ERROR ANALYSIS IN CERTAIN "PREPOSITIONS OF PLACE"

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1. Introduction

This research deals with the analysis of errors made by university students in the use of certain prepositions of place: over, above, into, on, and to. The aim of this research is to account for the reasons that make the student commit different types of errors in order to specify suitable procedures in teaching prepositions of place and offer suggestions for conducting effective solutions in this area.

Prepositions are very common in English sentences. Using prepositions is one of the best and easiest ways to make sentences were agreeable. In English, prepositions are function words in the sense that they have several possible functions depending on the context in which they occur and they may change the meaning of the sentence. (Robert, 1956: 88).

The proper use of preposition is one of the most serious problems faced learners of English especially these learning it as a foreign language (FL hence forth). Such a problem is well-documented in the literature and well-known to teachers of English at all levels of study. Swan (1980: 483), however, relates the difficulty to the multi-facetted nature of most of the preposition.

2. Prepositions of place

The choice of a preposition is often governed by the way we see an object. In deciding whether to use, for example, at, on, or in in a certain context, we must first answer the question:

Is the object:

- a- a point in space.
- b- a line.
- c- a surface.
- d- an area.
- e- a volume.

The answer depends on what the speaker imaging or sees the object to be at the time of speaking, not on how the object can be measured mathematically according to the three dimensions types (Leech, 1975: 82; Close, 1975: 170).

2.1 At types preposition

This preposition is used to indicate the place in which something or somebody was, is, or will be.

- a. We use at denote the place where someone or something occurs. The place, here, is a point in space that has no dimensions, e.g.,
 - 1. If you are at the North Pole, every directions is south.
 - 2. The accident occurred at the cross roads.
- b. We use at to say that somebody or something is near or close to an object or a thing: at the door, at the gate, at the window, at the cottage, at the shop, at the bus stop.
 - 3. Who's that man standing at the window.
 - 4. My car is at the cottage.

c. At is used with the name of place, or when we are interested in the activity that happens there and not in the exact shape or dimensions of the place. Also at is used when we talk about places of entertainment.

5. I'll meet you at Victoria Station.

6. I was at the theatre last week.

d. At is used to talk about places where people work or study. The place, here indicates some function rather than locality. (Wood, 1974: 12).

e. At is used to say that somebody is at an event. Here the place does not indicate locality, it is just an event.

7. How many students were there at the lecture?

8. I saw Jack at a football match last Sunday.

f. At can be used with a possessive to mean at somebody's house or shop, e.g.,

9. Where is Jane? Is she at hair dresser's again?

10. No, she's at her mother's (Swan, 1980: 88), e.g.

g. We at to mean towards.

11. The goat ran at the passerby.

2.2 On-type prepositions

a. On is used to refer to something which is touching or close to a line

12. London is on the River Thames.

13. Ports mouth is on the south coast of England. (Swan, 1980: 88).

b. On is often used to say that something is resting on top of a surface of an object or in contact with a vertical surface of an object, e.g.

14. Come on, supper is on the table.

15. We spent the afternoon in a boat on the lake.

16. The dog was sleeping on the mat.

17. A mirror is hung on the wall.

On is also used refer to something on a page, on a cover, on a map, on a list.

18. Continued on page five. (Murphy, 1998: 123), (Swan, 1980: 88).

c. On is used to denote covering or forming part of the surface, i.e. in contact with a surface; lying against, e.g.

19. There is a carpet on the floor.

20. She was wearing a wedding ring on her third finger.

d. We use on to indicate a means of support from beneath, supported by or fastened to, e.g.

21. The roof of the building is supported on pillars.

e. On is used to represent a place, on object or part of the body as the recipient of an activity, e.g.

22. She knocked on the door.

f. On is used to mean 'hanging from' or 'attached to', e.g.

23. Hang the hat on a nail.

g. On is used with the word floor (to say what part of the house somebody lives in), e.g.

24. Our flat on the second floor of the building.

h. On is also used for public transport, e.g.

25. I had lunch on the train.

26. There many people on the bus. (Murphy, 1998: 124).

2.3 In-type preposition

a. In is used to indicate position of something when surrounded by all sides within a particular place which is seen a volume, e.g.

27. There is on one in the room.

28. The food is in the cupboard.

In is also used to indicate entry to such place, e.g.

29. She put her money in the purse. (Wood, 1974: 44), (Swan, 1980: 88), (Murphy, 1998: 122).

b. In is used for position or entry on a surface with a wall, fence, barbed wire, etc. round it, e.g.

30. I saw her in the car park. (Ibid).

c. In is used with larger areas: continents, countries, province, towns and cities, regions, and larger is lands, e.g.

31. She lives in Cambridge shire. (Chalker, 1989: 221), (Wood, 1974: 45), (Murphy, 1998: 122).

d. In is used to convey the idea of holding, e.g.

32. He has sword in his hand.

33. The parcel was wrapped in a paper (Wood, 1974: 45).

e. In is used to express internal physical environment, e.g.

34. They lost themselves in the fog. (Ibid: 44).

f. In is used to talk about the position of things which form part of the line, e.g.

35. There is a misprint in the sixth line on page 22.

36. When I go to the cinema, I prefer to sit in the front row.

37. They stood in the queue. (Swan, 1980: 88), (Murphy, 1998: 123).

Also in is used to indicate division or grouping, e.g.

38. The pencils are packed in dozens. (Wood, 1974: 45).

g. In and into

In can be used to indicate both position and movement, e.g.

39. There is some water in the bottle.

Into indicates movement or entrance, e.g.

40. Pour some water into the bottle.

In case of movement , in and into are interchangeable, e.g.

41. He put his hand in/into his pockets.

However, they are not interchangeable in all cases:

1. moving from outside to inside.

42. We ran into the house when it started to rain.

2. moving when already inside; in this case in is obligatory, e.g.

43. Don't run when you are in the house.

(Thompson and Martinet, 1986: 98-9), (Lose, 1975: 171).

2.4 Overlapping-types prepositions (at, on, in)

2.4.1 at and on

a. We usually say on a sea/ river/lake/road, etc. But we can also say at a sea/river/lake/road, etc., e.g.

44. We live at the seaside.

45. Portsmouth is on the seaside.

b. At is used with words side and edge, e.g.

46. I parked my car at the side of the road.

47. Britain used to be at the edge of the known world.

(Quirk *et al.*, 1978: 310) , (Thompson and Martinet, 1986: 98).

2.4.2 at and in

a. In and at for towns, cities, etc. In is used for continents, countries, provinces and sizeable territories of any kind. But for towns, cities and villages either at or in is used, depending on the point of view. We use in when we think of place as having three dimensions e.g.

48. We live in New York.

49. He works in London.

But we use at when we regard the place a point on the map if a global distances were in wind, or station on a journey.

50. We stopped at New York on the way to Tokyo.

51. We stopped at as small village on the way to London.

52. They are at the airport. (Swan, 1980: 88), (Murphy, 1998: 124), (Shepherd *et al.*, 1989: 261), (Quirk *et al.*, 1973: 310).

2.4.3 At and in for building

With building, both in and at can be used. The difference here is that in means inside only, while at refers to the building in its institutional structure or functional aspect, that is when the building is thought of as an institution rather than in physical terms; the size, shape and the nature of the building is not important.

Compare:

53. He lives in Cambridge. (in the city).

54. He studies at Cambridge. (at the university).

(Leech and Svartvik, 1975: 86), (Swan, 1980: 88).

2.4.4 On and in

a. There is a difference between 'surface' and 'volume' in:

55. We sat on the grass.

56. We sat in the grass.

In (55), we treat the grass as a surface, while in (56) we treat it as a volume. (Leech and Svartvik, 1975: 86), (Quirk *et al.*, 1973: 312).

b. There is difference between 'surface' and 'area'. Both of them have two dimensions, that is length and width, but an area is seen as a surrounded surface or an enclosed or bounded space, e.g.

57. He was born in Cuba. (area).

58. Robinson Crusoe was marooned on a desert island .(surface) (Leech and Svartvik, 1975: 86).

2.4.5 In and on

a. On is used with the names of most parts of the body surface, e.g.

59. She has blood on her forehead.

60. I kissed her on both cheeks.

b. In is used with softer and more hollow parts of the body surface, e.g.

61. I hit him on the jaw.

62. I hit him in the eye/mouth/ribs/stomach. (Swan, 1980: 88).

2.5 Over-type Prepositions

Over is used to mean:

a. directly or vertically above.

63. The doctor and the policeman were leaning over the body when we arrived, e.g.

64. Lamp should be hung over the desk.

b. above and covering, e.g.

65. There is a thick cloud over the south of England.

66. Hold the umbrella over your head.

c. before and covering with contact, e.g.

67. They hung a curtain over the picture.

68. She wore a veil over her face.

d. across, from one side to the other, e.g.

69. There is a bridge over the river.

70. Electricity cables stretch over the fields. (Shepherd *et al.*, 1989: 272).
- e. beyond, on the far side of, e.g.
71. Who lives in that house over the road?
- f. up then down to the other side of, e.g.
72. Instead of opening the gate, we climbed over it.
73. They climbed over the wall.
- g. destination, up then onto, e.g.
74. They threw a blanket over her.
- Over can imply contact or imminent contact, or covering (not necessarily higher), e.g.
75. The porter threw a sheet over the sofa.
- h. downwards from the edge of, e.g.
76. The child fell over the cliff.
- i. as a result of collision with. (After such verbs as fall, stumble, tip).
77. He fell over a stone.
- j. near to and watching. (mainly after the verbs stand and sit).
78. He will never do anything properly unless you stand over him.
79. He stood over me while I wrote the letter.
9. resultative, have reached the cestination, e.g.
80. The horses are over the fence now.
81. At last we are over the crest of the hill.
10. motion, e.g.
82. They splashed water (all) over me.
83. The dog ran over the flower borders. (Wood, 1974: 67), (Quirk *et al.*, 1972: 315), (Chalker, 1989: 225), (Leech and Svartvike, 1975: 87).

2.6 Above-type preposition

1. Above is used to mean that something is on a higher level than the other in space or physical position with no intrinsic contact between them or movement, e.g.

84. The castle stands on a hill above the valley.

85. The mountains tower above the town.

86. The church spire could be seen above the trees.

(Chalker, 1989: 225), (Wood, 1974: 4).
2. Above is used when we think about measurement on a vertical scale. Heights of lands are given above not over sea level, e.g.

87. The summit of Everest is over 8000 meters above sea level.

88. The temperature was only a few degrees above freezing point. (Wood, 1974: 4), (Shepherd *et al.*, 1989: 266).

2.7 Above and Over

In many context these two words are virtually interchangeable and it is not always easy to know which of them is the right one to choose in a certain situation. Both over and above express relative position in a vertical direction. They can both be used to mean higher than, and some times either is correct to use, e.g.

89. Can you see the helicopter over/above the palace?
90. Flags waved above/ over our heads.
91. they live above/over a shop.
92. they live in a flat three floors over/above us.

The main difference between above and over is that over tends to indicate a direct vertical relationship, that is one thing is immediately or directly above the other even if a distance separates them, and/ or spatial proximity (nearness), while above may mean simply that one object is at a higher level than the other.

He held his hands over his head could mean that he held them straight up from his shoulder, so that they rose higher than his head; whereas he held his hands over his head either means that they were super imposed on his head, or that they partially covered his head.

Compare:

93. The roof rack is on top of the car.

94. The bird hovered over the car.

95. There are clouds above the car.

The type of preposition in (93), (94), and (95) above is used according to the spatial proximity . (Leech and Svartik, 1975: 87), (Quirk *et al.*, 1972: 311), (Wood, 1974: 67), (Thomson and Martinet, 1986: 99)

Notice the difference between:

96. He had a plaster above his eye.

97. He had a plaster over his eye.

3. Data Collection

This section deals with the test design and the procedures followed in carrying out the practical part of the study. It discusses the following points:

1. selection of material , 2. construction of the test, 3. sampling

3.1 Selection of material

The first step in test construction is to determine what material should make up the test to meet the objectives of the research. The test is designed for fourth and first stages assuming that the students in both stages have more command on the language so the researcher has to select the test material carefully so as to elicit as much data as possible through ensuring that the test items reflect the developmental stages of the sample. The material used in this investigation includes all the seven preposition stated in the introduction.

3.2 Construction of the test

The type of data is of the recognition type. This technique is of the multiple choice type and consists of 22 items .

3.3 Sampling

The subjects chosen for this research are 63v students (male and female). The students are from fourth and first stages at the Dep. Of English, College of Education. These 63 students are divided into two groups-the first consists of 23 students (fourth year) and the second group if consists of 40 students.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the result of the test with the aids of table and statistical means. It also analysis the students' performance in the recognition of prepositions of place (over-above-in-into-on-to-act). The first step in the analysis of the results is to find out how for our learners develop in the learning of the prepositions under investigation. In other words we seek an answer to the question; do our learners acquire prepositions of place. Having assigned the point of acquisition, we calculated the number of correct responses by each of our subjects.

Table (1)
Students' performance of preposition

Stage	Recognition
First year	% 48
Fourth year	% 56

5. Error Analysis

5.1 First year students

1. At

We live _____ the seaside.

Ali is waiting me _____ the shop.

Table (2)

Incorrect responses- At

Stage	In	On	Over	To	Above	Total	Percentage
First ear	8	4	3	2	1	18	

As shown in table (1), the students in the first year have made (18) errors in the use of the preposition at. These errors can be attributed to first language interference because the Arabic preposition في, which is taken as the equivalent for the English preposition in, is used as a substitute for at can be attributed to first language interference. The students use in as a substitute for at because the Arabic preposition في which is taken as the equivalent for the English preposition in is used in such a context.

2. Over

We flew _____ France Haly.

They are building a new bridge _____ the river.

Table 3

Incorrect Responses

Stage	Above	On	Total	Percentage
First year	30	20	50	62%

As shown in table 3, the percentage of committing errors is 62%. The students use above 30 times instead of over ; on 20 times instead of over. Hey use incorrect preposition due to the vague understanding of the prepositions over and above.

Table 4

Incorrect Responses – On

Stage	In	Into	At	total	Percentage
First ear	35	23	9	67	83%

Table (4) shows that (67) errors are made which form 83% percent of the total. The students use in instead of on thirty –five times, into twenty-three times; at nine times. The influence of the first language is quite evident in the first example above since the Arabic equivalent of the preposition on, على, is never used in this context. As a matter of fact no preposition used by the students can be attributed to Arabic because a different structure is used in this context. The structure of the second example is far closer to that of Arabic where the equivalent على is used.

3. In

Ali was sitting _____ an armchair

He is lying _____ now.

Table 5

Incorrect responses – In

Stage	On	At	Total	Percentage
First ear	74	3	77	86%

Table (5) shows that the preposition of place in causes a trouble spot for the students who record (77) errors which form 96% of the total. In the two example

above, the students use on rather than in especially in the first example. The major source of these errors is the interference of the first language because in Arabic the preposition على is used with chair and bed. At is used three times. This may be attributed to ignorance of the general rules of English preposition.

5.2 Fourth Year Student

We live _____ the seaside

Ali is waiting me _____ bookshop

Table (6)

Incorrect Responses – At

Stage	On	In	To	Above	Over	Total	Percentage
Fourth year	9	6	1	1	1	18	39%

As shown in table number (6), the students in the fourth year have made (18) errors in the use of the preposition interference because the Arabic preposition على is used in such a context used in such a context

2- Over

He stood _____ me while I wrote the letter.

The bird hovered _____ the car.

Table (7)

Incorrect Responses-Over

Stage	Above	Total	Percentage
Fourth year	25	25	54%

As shown in table (7), (25) errors are committed by the students which constitute 54% of the whole number of the items. The students use above instead of over due to the vague understanding of the prepositions above and over.

3- Above

We are flying ----- the water .

Table (8)

Incorrect Responses - Above

Stage	Above	Total	Percentage
Fourth year	12	12	52%

As shown in table (8), (12) errors are made in the use of the preposition above. They use over instead of above. The major source of these errors is the vague understanding of the English prepositions. The students confuse between the exact meaning are use of these two prepositions since they are interchangeable in many contexts.

4- Into

We ran _____ the house when it started to rain.

Table (9)

Incorrect responses – Into

Stage	At	In	Total	Percentage
Fourth year	2	3	5	17%

As shown in Table (9), 5 errors are made in the use of the preposition into (21%). The students incorrectly use the preposition at twice, in three times.

The major source of these errors is the vague understanding of the English prepositions. The students in this stage confuse between in and into.

5- To

Throw the ball _____ the dog

Table (10)

Incorrect responses – To

Stage	On	At	Total	Percentage
Fourth year	2	4	6	26%

As shown in table (10), 6 errors are made in the use of the preposition to twice, at four times.

The major source of these errors is the vague understanding of the use of the prepositions in English and the meaning of the sentence.

Table (11)

Fourth year			First year		
Item	Correct	Incorrect	Item	Correct	Incorrect
1	11	12	1	16	24
2	11	12	2	13	27
3	11	12	3	22	18
4	15	8	4	28	12
5	18	5	5	11	29
6	14	9	6	14	26
7	18	5	7	33	7
8	5	18	8	2	38
9	1	22	9	4	36
10	8	15	10	8	32
11	6	17	11	5	35

6. Conclusions

The conclusions arrived at in this research are :

- 1- The students fail to acquire the prepositions of place since none of them attains the acquisition level . This reveals that the problem is serious .
- 2- The general performance has shown that fourth year students perform better in using prepositions of place than first year students.
- 3- Errors committed by first year students are more than those committed by fourth year students.
- 4- Confusion in using different types of prepositions on the part of the learners. This confusion could be ascribed to overgeneralization and simplification whereby the students employ the already mastered the rules of language 2 in the handling of English prepositions of place regardless of their specific restrictions.
- 5- The results also show that the correct responses are not completely due to aspects of similarity between the first language and second language.
- 6- Error analysis of the study has revealed the following reasons and factors behind the student's errors in the use of English prepositions of place:
 - a- Interlingual interference, whereby the students carry over rules from Arabic into English.
 - b- Conflict between the use of preposition of place of the first language and the second language is responsible for most of the errors made by the learners.
 - c- The results show that the students have a vague understanding of the meaning of certain prepositions.

7. Pedagogical Implications

On the basis of the stated results, the following pedagogical implications are recommended:

- Teachers should emphasize on the prepositions which no equivalents in Arabic.
- Teachers should provide detailed explanations of the meaning of each preposition.
- Teachers may use arrows, lines, squares, boxes and other visual aids to explain the meaning of the prepositions.
- The English prepositions of place could be introduced within each stage due to the essential use of them.

Appendix 1

The Recognition Test/ Fourth Year

Fill in the blanks with the suitable option:

- He stood _____ me while I wrote the letter.
a. over b. above c. on d. at
- The bird hovered _____ the car.
a. in b. on c. over d. above
- We are flying _____ the water
a. on b. over c. in d. above
- We live _____ the seaside
a. at b. in c. on d. over
- We ran _____ the house when it started to rain.
a. in b. at c. into d. to
- Ali is waiting me _____ bookshop.
a. on b. in c. at d. through
- Throw the ball _____ the dog.
a. at b. on c. in d. to
- Ali was sitting _____ an armchair
a- in b. on c. over d. above
- He is lying _____ bed now.
a. over b. in c. on d. at
- She had new gloves _____ her hands
a. on b. over c. at d. in
- Put the stamp _____ your letter in the right hand corner.
a. in b. at c. on d. over

Appendix 11

The Recognitions Test / First Year Students

Fill in the blanks with the suitable option:

- We flew _____ France to Haly.
a. above b. over c. on d. in
- We were flying _____ the clouds.
a. on b. over c. above d. at
- We live _____ the seaside.
a. in b. on c. at d. over.
- We ran _____ the house when it started to rain.
a. in b. into c. at d. to
- Ali is waiting me _____ bookshop.
a. in b. at c. on d. into
- They are building a new bridge _____ the river.

- a. above b. over c. on d. in
 7- Throw the ball _____ the dog.
 a. at b. to c. on d. over
 8- Ali was sitting _____ an armchair
 a. in b. on c. over d. into
 9- He is lying _____ bed now.
 a. on b. in c. over d. into

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