



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية

ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>



Investigating Iraqi Preparatory School Pupils' Knowledge of English Prepositions of Time and Place

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Received: 11/2/ 2025, Accepted: 25/3 /2025, Online Published: 30 /6/ 2025

Abstract

English language is an international language that many people worldwide, including Iraq, try to learn. As such, teaching and learning English as a foreign language has taken an outstanding position in the educational system of the country. Grammar is essential regardless of whether a language is taught or learnt, and without grammar, no one can correctly write or speak language. There are many grammatical components including prepositions which play a crucial role as they form a crucial part of the structure of both spoken and written English. The proper use of prepositions usually indicates the speaker or writer's ability on the part of the speaker or writer to select the right preposition and put it in its right position within the utterance or the sentence. On this basis, teaching the prepositions of English and implying them within the curricula at the different studying levels have been heavily heeded by English language textbook designers. Yet, Iraqi learners of English find it difficult to use prepositions, mainly those of time and place, appropriately as they fail to choose the right prepositions in, on, at of time and place, and put them in the right context. Setting out from this problematic issue, the current research aims at probing Iraqi secondary pupils' knowledge of the English prepositions of time and place, namely at, on and in at both comprehension and recognition levels. It is hypothesized that Iraqi secondary school pupils do not have good

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control over the use of prepositions of time and place already referred to and that there are no differences between pupils of urban and rural schools as far as their knowledge of the prepositions of time and place is concerned. To bring about the preceding aims and validate the relevant hypotheses, a test of 40 items (20 on the prepositions of time and 20 on the prepositions of place) has been administered to 2 samples of female pupils, 20 pupils each, at two preparatory schools (a school inside the city of Mosul and another outside the city of Mosul) to investigate their knowledge of the prepositions in question in terms of comprehending and recognizing them. The findings show a low performance by both samples of pupils with a slight difference in favour of the sample of pupils of the urban school.

Keywords: Prepositions of Time, Prepositions of Place, Preparatory School Pupils, Perceptions.

تقسي معرفة الطلبة العراقيين في المرحلة الاعدادية بحروف جر الزمان والمكان في اللغة الانكليزية

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اعدادية زينب للبنات - مديرية تربية محافظة نينوى - محافظة نينوى

المستخلص

اللغة الإنجليزية هي لغة عالمية يرغب العديد من الناس في جميع أنحاء العالم، بما في ذلك العراق، في إتقانها. وعلى هذا النحو، احتل تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مكانة بارزة في النظام التعليمي للبلاد. تعد القواعد النحوية ضرورية بغض النظر عما إذا كانت اللغة تُدرّس أو تُتعلّم، وبدون القواعد النحوية، لا يستطيع أحد لكتابة أو التحدث بلغة ما بشكل صحيح. هناك العديد من المكونات النحوية بما في ذلك حروف الجر التي تلعب دورًا مهمًا لأنها تشكل جزءًا أساسيًا من بنية اللغة الإنجليزية المنطوقة والمكتوبة. يشير الاستخدام الصحيح لحروف الجر عادة إلى قدرة المتكلم أو الكاتب على اختيار حرف الجر المناسب ووضعه في موضعه الصحيح داخل الجملة أو كتابة. وعلى هذا الأساس، فقد حظي تدريس حروف الجر في اللغة الإنجليزية وإدراجها ضمن المناهج الدراسية في مختلف مستويات الدراسة باهتمام كبير من قبل مصممي كتب اللغة الإنجليزية. ومع ذلك، يجد متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيون صعوبة في استخدام حروف الجر، وخاصة حروف الجر الخاصة بالزمان والمكان، بشكل مناسب لأنهم يفشلون في اختيار حروف الجر الصحيحة للزمان والمكان وخاصة in و on و at ووضعها في السياق الصحيح. انطلاقًا من هذه الإشكالية، يهدف

البحث الحالي إلى استكشاف معرفة طلبة المرحلة الثانوية العراقيين بحروف الجر الإنجليزية الخاصة بالزمان والمكان على مستوى الفهم والإدراك. وتم الافتراض بأن طلبة المدارس الثانوية العراقية لا يتمتعون بقدر جيد من التحكم في استخدام حروف جر الزمان والمكان المشار إليها آنفاً، وأنه لا توجد فروق بين طلبة المدارس الحضرية والريفية فيما يتعلق بمعرفتهم بها. ولتحقيق الأهداف السابقة وإثبات صحة الفرضيات ذات الصلة، تم تطبيق اختبار مكون من 40 فقرة (20 فقرة لحروف جر الزمان و20 فقرة لحروف جر المكان) على عيّنتين من الطالبات، 20 طالبة لكل منهما، في مدرستين إعداديتين (مدرسة داخل مدينة الموصل وأخرى خارج مدينة الموصل) للتحقق من معرفتهن بحروف الجر المعنية من حيث فهمها والتعرف عليها. وأظهرت نتائج الاختبار أن أداء كلتا العيّنتين من الطالبات كان منخفضاً للغاية؛ ولكن مع وجود فرق طفيف بين العيّنتين لصالح عينة المدرسة داخل مدينة الموصل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حروف الجر الزمانية، حروف الجر المكانية، طلاب المدارس الإعدادية، التصورات

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the contentious topics in language instruction is the function of grammar. Nonetheless, there is some consensus among those involved that teaching grammar is one of the elements of instruction that supports language learning. It helps language learners understand the nature of language by teaching them the rules. This provides a detailed explanation of language structure and form.

According to its traditional definition, a preposition is regarded as a speech element that is notably significant in a sentence since it demonstrates the relationships between various elements, such as nouns, pronouns, and verbs. It is a brief lexis that is employed in sentences and typically comes before a noun or pronoun; in other words, it indicates the location or timing of something in relation to another. Time and place prepositions are part of a significant category of English prepositions. Since they are frequently used by English language producers, speakers, and writers in their daily social and/or individual English usage, the latter are typically in common usage (Catalan.1996).

Lam (2009) as cited in Al-Mubarak (2017) states that it is not an easy task to master prepositions. Some teachers used the conventional approach of teaching prepositions one at a time inside context, without any additional development. This implies that prepositions are learned contextually and cannot be predicted. For learners to

comprehend the use of the prepositions time and place, it is not helpful to try to memorize a list of distinct, unconnected uses.

The problem of the current research is that many learners of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) find it difficult and challenging to properly use prepositions, specially those that are morphological forms and have many functions. The English prepositions for time and place, namely **in**, **on**, and **at** form no exception. In this context and to augment the problem at hand, Lam (2009) points out that many English prepositions like **on**, **in**, **from**, **to**, **for**, and **or** are frequently monosyllabic and how they are used in various languages varies greatly. A point that makes it difficult for non-native or incompetent language users to identify such variability. Finally, Catalan (1996) adds that the challenges that EFL learners encounter are also exacerbated by the large number of prepositions in the English language, which makes it harder for them to systematize English prepositions.

The current research aims at investigating Iraqi secondary school pupils' knowledge of the English prepositions of time and place, namely **in**, **on** and **at**, at both cognitive and productive levels.

On the basis of the foregoing aims, it is hypothesized that

1. Iraqi secondary school pupils lack good control over the use of prepositions of time and place, namely **in**, **on** and **at**.
2. There are differences between pupils studying at urban and rural schools in terms of their knowledge of the **in**, **on** and **at** prepositions of time and place at the cognitive and productive levels.

The present research is confined to the study of English prepositions of time and place, namely **in**, **on** and **at** which form a part of the syllabus for teaching English grammar at the secondary stage during the academic year 2022-2023. It is further limited to a selected sample of 5th stage female pupils at two secondary schools, one rural and one urban, in Ninevah Governorate.

This research, on the basis of its findings and suggested recommendations, is expected to be of some benefit to teachers in their classroom teaching of English grammar to the secondary stage pupils as it will provide them, i.e. teachers, with some feedback on their pupils' mastery of the use of the prepositions of time and place and where the weaknesses of their knowledge lie. Pupils are also expected to benefit from this research as it comprises many theoretical points that are aided with examples which might add to their knowledge at large and what they already know about this class of English words, i.e. prepositions, in particular.

2. ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS

The term preposition has been extensively dealt with by various grammarians. Traditional grammarians define a preposition as a word or group of words used to link nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence. According to The Cambridge

Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1995), a preposition is defined as “a word that connects a noun, a [noun phrase](#), or a pronoun to another word, especially to a [verb](#), another noun, or an [adjective](#)”. On its part, The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (2005) outlines that a preposition is “a word or group of words, such as *in, from, to, out of* and *on behalf of*, used before a noun or pronoun to show place, position, time or method”. Additionally, Aarts (2014) view English prepositions as [words](#) – such as *of, in, on, at, from*, etc. that function as the [head](#) of a [prepositional phrase](#), and most characteristically license a [noun phrase object](#) (e.g. *in the water*). [Morphologically](#), according to Leech (2006), prepositions are usually simple and do not inflect. They form a [closed lexical category](#). [Semantically](#), they most typically [denote](#) relations in [space](#) and [time](#) (Aarts, 2014).

III. The Uses of Prepositions

When used in contexts, prepositions are thought to display a few important qualities and carry out a few essential tasks. Generally speaking, the following are some of the various uses of prepositions in English:

- Showing the direction of something.
- Referring to the time of something happening.
- Denote the position or location of an object in the sentence.
- Representing spatial relationships (<https://byjus.com/english/prepositions>).

The same preceding reference puts forward the following list of the most popular prepositions of English in everyday communication:

Table 1: Examples of the Most Popular English Prepositions

Examples of English Prepositions			
On	At	In	Over
Around	Through	Opposite to	In front of
Behind	Beneath	Beside	Above

Below	Under	Underneath	Down
Up	Out	With	Into
Onto	Across	After	Before
Near	Among	Along	Between
Toward	Away	From	To
Next to	By	Until	About

Yet, prepositions in English language are so many that it nearly seems impossible to be completely clear. The following is a list of a number of English language prepositions of time and place, the subject of the current research, that makes learners get confused in their attempt to use them in their everyday speech or writing:

- In / On / At Prepositions

These three prepositions can be used to depict both time and position. The table below, based on (<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu>), below demonstrates the three prepositions in such a way that makes learners have a better understanding of how they are used:

Table 2: English Preposition In, On, and At Used for Place and Time

Prepositions of Place		
In	On	At
May be used to display general geographic areas like neighborhoods, cities, countries, and places that have a border.	Can be used to describe places that are more precise, such as streets, avenues, islands, surfaces, and big vehicles:	Can be used to refer to very specific locations: - <i>We can meet at the park.</i> - <i>She is at home now.</i>

- He lives <i>in</i> Egypt.	- She lives on the 4 th floor.	
- We will be staying in a motel tommorow.	- The dictionary is on the rack.	
Prepositions of Time		
In	On	At
Can be used to represent a variety of time intervals, including days, months, centuries, and years. - Jane was born <i>in</i> 1998.	Can be used to refer to dates, days of the week, days of the month, and holidays. - We will meet <i>on</i> Christmas day.	Can be used to indicate very precise hours, dayparts, and holidays.- The meeting is <i>at</i> 8.00 p.m.

Based on the contents of the preceding table, Prepositions of Time can be viewed to refer to one point in time, and as follows:

In is used with the parts of the day (not specific times), months, years, and seasons:

- He travels *in* the morning.
- The weather is hot *in* August.
- Ali was born *in* 2014.
- He takes English courses *in* Spring.

At is with the time of day and with noon, night, and midnight.

- I go to college *at* 8.00 a.m,
- John takes lunch *in* noon.
- They usually do jogging *at* night.
- They stop watching TV *at* midnight.

On is used with days;

- I study a lot *on* Fridays.
- He goes shopping *on* Staurdays,

As for Prepositions of Place, **in**, **on** and **at**, they are used to refer to a place and a follows:

In (the point itself).

- The pupils are **in** the class.
- They are playing **in** the garden.

At (the general area)

- He may be **at** school now.
- We will meet **at** the school library.

On (the surface).

- The books are **on** the table.
- The dictionary is **on** the shelf.

2.1 . Main Reasons behind EFL Pupils' Wrong Use of English

Prepositions

There are several reasons behind the difficulties encountered in learning English prepositions. The first reason, according to Scott and Tucker (1974), is that Arabic and English prepositions are very different. According to them, native Arabic interference is responsible for about two-thirds of prepositional errors. As such, learners get confused on attempting to identify the proper meaning of a preposition to be used in the right way. Second, mother tongue interference has been identified as a further main reason behind using English prepositions by learners learning EFL. Many learners simply mix between a preposition that has a meaning in their native language which may be wrongly thought to be used in English (Habash, 1982). An example is:

- Arabic: هو خائف من الكلب

Additionally, the reasons behind learners' misuse of English preposition at both recognition and production levels have been attended to by many researchers. In this respect, Zughoul (1979) highlights that traditional teaching approaches that encourage pupils to mentally translate, such as the grammar translation method, and the native language interference with English make learning English prepositions particularly challenging for learners of EFL. Also, Gass and Selinker (1983) state that learners of EFL often try to connect the way English prepositions are used to the prepositional system of their native language. There is further the difficulty that stems from the disparity in the quantity of prepositions and the lack of a one-to-one mapping between prepositions in the learners' native language and English. Gass and Selinker conclude that English prepositions can be used in a very idiomatic way (especially in phrasal and preposition verbs), in such a way that makes even native speakers find it difficult to determine the

proper form of prepositions. On their part, Nayef and Hajjaj (1997) report that a main difficulty encountered by the EFL learners is their misuse of the elements related to English syntax. Additionally, Bond (2007) demonstrates that the inductive method of teaching, namely inductive learning through memorization of prepositions and their applications does not provide learners with fundamental comprehension of the different prepositions and their functions. James (2007) demonstrates that the rules governing the use of prepositions vary depending on the language, hence making the learning of English prepositions difficult. In other words, lack of basic knowledge of preposition side by side with their multiple usage are factors that make the learning of English prepositions a difficult task. Finally, Al-Mubarak (2017) mentions that the polysemous natures of prepositions, i.e. prepositions are likely to have many meanings, makes learning them quite challenging and difficult.

3. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The sample chosen for the present study comprises (40) female pupils, whose identity was kept confidential, and were randomly selected from among 5th stage pupils at 2 Secondary schools, 1 inside the city of Mosul and rural, outside the city, during the academic year 2022-2023.

4. PROCEDURE AND DATA COLLECTION

To bring about the aims of the current research, a set of questions (See Appendix) has been prepared with main focus on (1) pupils' general knowledge of English prepositions, and (2) their knowledge of the prepositions of time and place, namely **on**, **in** and **at** (See Appendix).

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

- Hypothesis no.1

Iraqi secondary school pupils do not have good mastery over the use of prepositions of time and place in spite of their studying of them as a part of the grammar material assigned to be taught.

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the scores of the performance of both samples selected from the 2 schools within and without the city of Mosul. The tables also show the total scores of all the 20 testees' performance on the test of prepositions.

Table 1: Preparatory School Pupils' Scores on the Test of Prepositions

(The School Inside the City)

	Test				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
1	3	5	2	5	15
2	2	3	4	0	9

3	4	4	4	3	15
4	6	4	2	5	17
5	0	3	3	4	10
6	7	7	9	7	30
7	8	2	6	1	17
8	6	5	1	4	16
9	7	3	3	4	17
10	6	4	3	6	19
11	6	6	4	5	21
12	7	5	4	3	19
13	4	6	3	7	20
14	8	6	3	4	21
15	4	7	3	6	19
16	5	5	4	2	16
17	4	4	2	4	14
18	7	6	8	7	28
19	5	5	2	4	16
20	5	5	4	6	20

Mean Score: 18.5

No. and Percentage of Failures: 14 70%

**Table 2: Secondary School Pupils' Scores on the Test of Prepositions
(The School Outside the City)**

	Test
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	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
1	6	6	7	5	24
2	2	2	5	3	12
3	7	4	4	4	19
4	2	3	5	5	15
5	2	3	4	3	12
6	3	3	3	3	12
7	4	3	2	2	11
8	2	2	6	6	16
9	3	2	4	2	11
10	2	3	3	5	13
11	3	4	2	6	15
12	1	2	5	2	10
13	3	1	4	1	9
14	3	0	2	3	8
15	5	6	5	5	21
16	6	3	7	7	23
17	4	2	7	7	20
18	7	5	5	4	21
19	5	7	3	0	15
20	1	2	7	7	17

Mean Score: 16.0

No. and Percentage of Failures: 15 75%

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the mean scores of the performance of the 2 samples of pupils at both schools on the test of English grammar prepositions of time and place namely **in**, **on**, and **at**. The mean score of the school inside the city of Mosul, namely Zainab Preparatory School for Girls, is 18.5 out of 40, and that of the school outside the city of Mosul, viz. Aski Mosul Preparatory School for girls is 16.0 out of 40. Both mean scores are well below the mid point, i.e. the success score 20. As such, it can be stated that pupils' knowledge of the prepositions of time and place, namely **on**, **in** and **it**, is very weak. Accordingly, hypothesis no.1 which states: "Iraqi secondary school pupils do not have good control over the use of prepositions of time and place, namely **in**, **on** and **at**, in spite of their studying of them as a part of the grammar material assigned to be taught" is accepted.

- Hypothesis no.2

There are no differences between pupils of urban and rural schools as far as their knowledge of the **in**, **on** and **at** prepositions of time and place is concerned.

Based on the mean scores, 18.5 of Zainab Preparatory School for Girls which is an urban school, and 16.0 for Aski Mosul Preparatory School for Girls which is a rural School, the former urban school pupils have achieved a mean score that is a bit higher than the rural school, although the performance of both samples highlight weak knowledge deduced from the 2 samples' performance on the test of English prepositions. Such a result may be due to the fact that teachers teaching at schools in side the city, i.e. urban schools, are mostly from among those who have years of experience in teaching English and have spent a part of that in teaching outside the city.

All in all, it is evident from the current study findings that Iraqi pupils attending preparatory schools are not proficient in employing the **in**, **on**, and **at** English prepositions of time and place. Furthermore, the interference of their native language with EFL is the reason why many pupils misuse the prepositions in question. To clarify, Iraqi pupils face additional difficulties learning English prepositions in general and the prepositions under study in particular due to the differences between Arabic and English prepositions in number, sense, and usage. Stated differently, there is no direct correspondence between prepositions in Arabic and English. Additionally, pupils make certain prepositional errors because they do not fully understand how a preposition is used in context.

6. CONCLUSION

Prepositions form a part and parcel of the English language. They are supposed to be introduced as early as possible in the curricula of English language teaching as they constitute an indispensable element in the speakers and writers' daily use of English language. Yet the mastery of this crucial component of English language is not that easy as learners of English encounter much difficulty in managing the use of English preposition at the levels of recognition and production. On this basis, the current study

has set out to investigate Iraqi secondary pupils knowledge of 3 English prepositions of time and place, namely in, on and at, by administering a written test to a sample of 40 preparatory school pupils at 2 schools, one inside the city of Mosul and another rural outside the city of Mosul. The results show that all testees' mastery of English prepositions is below the mid-point and that the pupils from the school inside the city of Mosul performed a bit higher on the test than their counterparts from the rural school outside the city.

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APPENDIXES

Q1. Fill in with correct prepositions of place.

- 1) He's swimming the river.
- 2) Where's Julie? She's school.
- 3) The plant is the table.
- 4) There is a spider the bath.
- 5) Please put those apples the bowl.
- 6) I saw Sarah ____ her new car.
- 7) There are two pockets this bag.
- 8) I read the story the newspaper.
- 9) The cat is sitting the chair.
- 10) Lucy was standing the bus stop.

Q2. Choose the correct preposition of place:

1. There are two pupils _____ the class.
 - a. in
 - b. on
 - c. at
2. The oranges are not in the basket. They are _____ the table.
 - a. on
 - b. .at
 - c. in
3. Some pupils are waiting _____ the library.
 - a. at
 - b. in
 - c. on
4. My pencil is _____ the books.
 - a. in
 - b. at
 - c. on
5. The red car is _____ the garage.
 - a. at
 - b. on
 - c. in
6. There isn't anything _____ my pocket.
 - a. on
 - b. at
 - c. in
7. Oh my God! I saw a mouse _____ the sofa.

a. at

b. in

c. on

8. He stayed too late the dentist.

a. in

b. on

c. at

9. The pupils were having a test the university.

a. on

b. at

c. in

10. Our flat is The 3rd floor.

a. in

b. on

c. at

Q3. Choose the Correct Preposition of Time:

1. I saw her Sunday.

a. in

b. on

c. at

2. I will travel to London Xmas day.

a. in

b. on

c. at

a. in

b. on

c. at

3. I was born..... July.

a. in

b. on

c. at

4. It happened 2001.

a. in

b. on

c. at

5. He started work Monday

a. in

b. on

c. at

6. She often travels summer.

a. in

b. on

c. at

7. We often go to the restaurant Friday night.

a. in

b. on

c. at

8. It rains a lot spring.

a. in

b. on

c. at

9. I get up 7 a.m.

a. in

b. on

c. at

10. The lessons are the afternoon.

a. in

b. on

c. at

Q4. Fill in with the correct preposition of time:

1. The parent-teacher meeting is..... 10 A.M.
2. I do not have any classes..... Sunday.
3. This year it started to snow..... November.
4. Yasmin's birthday is..... 31st December.
5. The stars twinkle brightly..... night.
6. I'll meet you Thursday.
7. The principal is not present the moment.
8. My mother will come back..... minutes.
9. Ahmed will visit his grandmother..... March.
10. 1980, the Iraqi-Iranian war took place.