

## Explorer Error Analysis Of The Use Of Preposition By EFL Students At University Level

The Researcher: Duaa Hussein Ahmed

Ministry of Education \ General Directorate of Nineveh Education

Email: [almuhandsdoaa@gmail.com](mailto:almuhandsdoaa@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The study aims to explore error analysis of the use of prepositions by EFL students at university level. The population includes third \_year students at the Department of English (Morning Studies), College of Education for Humanities. University of Mosul, in the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023. Twenty students were selected randomly to be the study sample. A test is given for them and they are asked to answer, then their answers are checked out to identify and analyze their mastery of using English prepositions. Their errors are common. The result shows that all students use prepositions when they speak and write but many of them do not know the proper usage. Based on the results the study concludes that there are a lot of serious problem facing students in using prepositions of (time, place and manner). How can they overcome these difficulties.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis . Preposition

إستكشاف تحليل الأخطاء في إستخدام حروف الجر من قبل طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية على المستوى الجامعي

الباحثة: دعاء حسين أحمد

وزارة التربية / مديرية تربية نينوى

الإيميل: [almuhandsdoaa@gmail.com](mailto:almuhandsdoaa@gmail.com)

### خلاصة

تهدف الدراسة إلى إستكشاف تحليل الأخطاء في إستخدام حروف الجر من قبل طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية على المستوى الجامعي. يضم مجتمع الدراسة طلبة المرحلة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية (الدراسة الصباحية) ، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية. جامعة الموصل ، في الفصل الدراسي الثاني من العام الدراسي 2022-2023. تم اختيار عشرين طالبًا بشكل عشوائي ليكونوا عينة الدراسة. يتم إجراء اختبار لهم ويطلب منهم الإجابة ، ثم يتم التحقق من إجاباتهم لتحديد وتحليل إتقانهم لاستخدام حروف الجر الإنكليزية. أخطائهم شائعة. توضح النتيجة أن جميع الطلاب يستخدمون حروف الجر عندما يتحدثون ويكتبون، لكن الكثير منهم لا يعرفون الاستخدام الصحيح. بناءً على النتائج ، يمكن استنتاج أن هناك الكثير من المشكلات الجادة التي تواجه الطلاب في استخدام حروف الجر (الوقت والمكان والحال). وكيف يمكن التغلب على تلك الصعوبات.

كلمات مفتاحية : تحليل الأخطاء ، حروف الجر

## 1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a process that involves many difficulties. One of them is the use of prepositions which has essential importance in every language, especially in English. EFL students make errors when they use some prepositions. Although students study English previously in school and continue their study in English departments, they still make errors concerning the use of proportions. Therefore, there are many ways to discover why they make errors. So my concern in this study is why do students make errors in using English prepositions? And what kinds of errors do students make?

**2. Aims of the study :** The present study aims at:

1. Describing the prepositions (in\_on\_at) semantically.
2. Identifying the most problematic prepositions; and
3. Diagnosing the sources of these difficulties and problems.

## 3. Hypothesis

The Hypothesis of this study suggests that many EFL learners have problems in using prepositions. Most of the learners know the meaning of the common prepositions but they can't apply them in the correctly in writing and speaking . The main reasons behind this might be:

- a. The interferences of the mother tongue, i.e. their first language which is Arabic
- b. The lack of information concerning the use of prepositions; and
- c. The lack of practice that leads to make mistakes.

## 4. Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

The population of the present study is third-year students at the Department of English, College of Education, University of Mosul (Morning Studies) in the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023. The study targeted all of them. Then, 20 students were selected randomly to be the study sample. They were chosen because it has been assumed that they have been studied English prepositions during their preparatory and secondary schools therefore, they have the necessary information to use them corectly in their appropriate context.

A multiple choice test is distributed to them where they are required to choose the correct one for each sentence. Then, their answers are checked out to

identify and analyze their level of mastery of using English prepositions, at which prepositions their errors are common.

## 5. Definitions of Basic Terms

### 5.1 Errors

"Error" is an item used to refer to those features of the learners' utterance which differ from those of any native speakers. Some linguists distinguish between mistakes made by native speakers and those by learners of foreign language or new language. Even native speakers make mistakes while speaking or writing. Native speakers are supposed to have a complete mastery over their language; yet they commit mistakes when they use their language, but when their attention is drawn to these mistakes, they can easily recognize and correct them. This sort of mistakes made by native are called "mistakes". They are random deviations (unsystematic) and aren't caused by ignorance of the system of the mother tongue. On the contrary, learners of a foreign language at not aware of their errors, and when their attention is drawn to them, they can't correct them without help. Learners commit these errors because they don't have adequate knowledge of language system they are learning. This sort of mistakes which are made by the learners of a foreign language are called errors. They are systematic deviations from norms of language been learnt and caused by ignorance of the system of the target language (Shihab, 1981:13).

Linguistic pay more attention to distinguish among types of error, so they said that when learners are tried or hurried they make performance error which are not serious; while competence errors are more serious if we compare them to performance since competence reflects inadequate learning. Competence shows the capability to speak and understand a language. On the other hand, performance presents the actual application of this capability in language behavior (Chomsky, 1965: 4). Other types are given by Corder in his book "Introducing Applied Linguistics" (1973: 272) overt and covert errors, Overt errors are when learners present sentences which are unacceptable, there is no doubt they are ungrammatical at the sentence level. In contrast, covert errors are grammatical ones at the sentence level which are acceptable by native speakers as being external arrange and might himself utter on the appropriate occasion.

Finally, there are global and local errors. Global errors prevent communication, they interrupt the message from being understood, for example:

I like bus but my mother so said not we be late for school.

On the other hand, local error do not prevent the message because there is a minor violation of one segment of a sentence that presents the hearer to guess the intended meaning, for example:

If I hear from her, I would let you know (Erdogan, 2005: 204).

(Habash,1982:261)presented two major sources of errors:

1. Interlingual errors: the first type of error which occur when a language learner carries habits of their mother tongue, which means that his/her first language habits (patterns, system, rules) forbid the learners from getting the patterns and rules of the target language
2. Intralingual errors: the second type of error which caused by the interference of the second language itself, the foreign learners make some of the error that are caused by the target language source not the mother tongue and they are signs of false hypotheses .Learners, in this case, are trying to derive the rules behind the data to which they have been exposed and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language .

## 5.2 Preposition

Preposition is a term used in grammatical classification of words referring to the group of items which precede noun phrase(often single noun or pronoun) to form a single constituent of structure (Crystal, 2008:383). According to Yates(1999:7) prepositions mean little words that never change. They are pronounced softly in the unstressed syllables and the word preposition straightforward definition, a word placed before noun or pronoun to define its relationship with another word in the sentence. Also, preposition is used to mean "a linguistic form that combines with noun equivalent to form a phrase that has an adverbial, adjectival or substantial relation to some words"(Dawood, 1984:6)

Mourssi (2015:92) states that preposition is an article which shows the connection between entities or connection in space (between one thing and another), and/or a connection in times (between an event).

The word "preposition" (Pre+Position) means "Place Before" (Essberger, 2009: 5). Also, prepositions mean words that are placed before nouns or pronouns and it can be followed by verbs but, except after but and except, the verb must be in the gerund form, for example:

-They succeeded in escaping.

The student has two main problems with prepositions.First S/he has to know whether in any structure a preposition is required or not, and secondly which preposition to use when one is required(Thomson and Martinet, 1960: 91).

The first problem is due to an Iraq student, who may find that a certain structure in their own language requires a preposition, whereas a similar one in English does not, and vice versa (the researcher)

"Prepositions are relatively easy to understand and have been classified in order to make their usage and understanding easier" (Satakar, 2000: 27). There are several types of prepositions: preposition of time, preposition of place, preposition of movement, preposition of agent, preposition of instrument and prepositional phrase.(ibid)

However, one reason for common prepositions errors can be found, especially in those denoting spatial relationships because of firstly, those prepositions are the most frequently used by the students. Secondly, "there are considerable differences among the uses of Arabic and English spatial prepositions." (Habash, 1982: 153). Another reason, overlapping between two different forms of prepositions made by the students constitutes one of the common errors of prepositions, and this is belong to the similarity of their forms (Sharif, 2012:91).

In addition, omission of necessary-prepositions is one of the common errors made by students those prepositions are needed in the sentences and without them , the sentences would be unacceptable. For example (omission of (of)):

- To deal with a foreigner requires knowledge of his mother tongue
- To deal with a foreigner requires knowledge his mother tongue (ibid: 25).

Another case is the use of one preposition instead of another (Habash, 1982: 153).

Zuheir(1990:37)said that "One of the greatest difficulties facing native and non-native speakers of English is the correct usage of English prepositions" Another difficulty is that most students use many prepositions in many different ways and their meaning doesn't belong to the context and prepositions (Fries, 1940: 48).

Also the factor that ccontributes n the difficulty of using prepositions is that many prepositions need to be followed or processed by a particular part of speech such as (verb form- adjective) (Zuheir, 1990:39). Another source of difficulty facing learners of English is that English speakers, even those who teach, are often unable to offer a good explanation for such prepositions (Takahashi, 1969:40). Moreover, Arab students face other problems belong to the Arabic language. Arabic prepositions are twenty, while English prepositions are much more numerous (Shihab, 1981: 93). Thus, translation of prepositions

from Arabic into English may create many errors and difficulties to the student. Many students, when translating English prepositions into Arabic, commit many mistakes (Zuheir, 1990:41).

Hence, the main source of difficulty in English prepositions is that these prepositions are not governed by rules and if there are rules many exceptions should be mentioned (ibid: 37).

### Error analysis

Keshavarz(1999:42)maintains that researchers start to find out an alternative approach for the study of errors;" an approach which would be theoretically justifiable and pedagogically practicable. First and second languages learning based on theories and the similarities between them is called "error analysis"

In language learning a more positive attitude grows up towards learners' errors confronted to what was prevalent in contrastive analysis tradition .Errors are no longer regarded as bad signs of failure, in teaching or learning to be eradicated at any cost, rather they are essential part of language learning process. Error Analysis appeared as a reaction to the view of second language learning suggestion by contrastive analysis theory which showed language transfer as the central process in the second and foreign languages learning. This view is transfer was tied to behavioral view of learning while "error analysis tries to account for learner's performance in recognizing the input they receive from the target language (ibid:43).

Crystal (2008:135) defines error analysis as "a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the mistakes made by someone learning a foreign language, using the principles and the procedures provided by linguistic ". Also it means "describing learner's knowledge of the target language at any particular moment in his learning in order to relate this knowledge to the teaching that he has received" (Corder, 1981:3).

Therefore, error analysis has little beyond "impressionistic collection of common errors and their taxonomic classification into categories (mistakes of agreement, omission of articles, etc.)" (Fisiaka,1981:221). Finally the research concluded that error occur because the learner does not know what is correct, it usually made due to the lack of knowledge. This means that they do not aware, knowing and understand the patterns of the language used.

Corder (1967:161- 9) states the usefulness of error analysis is upon three: to the researcher or linguist ,to the second language teacher and to the learner himself while the analysis of learners' errors provides insights into the nature of language, especially into the innate nature of the learner's system, they provide even more insights into the process of language teaching and learning. As such,

concrete conclusion may usually be drawn from the result of analysis regarding how a second or foreign language be more effectively taught and learned, or how existing method of teaching and learning can be improved.

Ali (2007:117) states the importance of error analysis in which researchers can attribute a cause to an error to some degree of precision and find out whether, for example, mother tongue interference, teaching techniques or problems in the target Language are the major causes of students' errors. Error evaluation makes learners aware of more serious types and consequently may try to avoid them.

However, there are some areas that are most common for EFL Errors, they can be classified as follows:

#### **a. Writing system (Orthopedic)**

As for writing system, Arabic learners of English face more difficulty in learning the system of English since the Roman alphabet is different from that of Arabic. Arabic has twenty- eight consonant; while English has twenty \_six. Moreover, in Arabic there is no distinction between print and script and also between upper case letters and lower ones (Scott,1962:10)

In addition ,Keshavarz (1999:77) says that Orthographic error, the inconsistency of English spelling system is caused most of the Orthographic errors, e.g. backs for box. In the majority cases there is no one to one unison between letters of alphabet and sound they represent, such as:

Spelling Representation    key word

o                                  to

oo                                too

wo                                two

Another source of difficulty and error in English Orthographic is homonyms, it occurs when we have words having the same pronunciation but different spelling and meaning e.g. meat, meet \_sea ,see . Or when we have two words that have the same form of spelling but different meaning, e.g. race (people) ,race (competition) ,date (day) date (meeting), date (fruit) (ibid) .

#### **b. Phonological Errors**

Errors that are serious to Arabic learners on English include the following categories:

1. Inconsistency in weak vowels spelling \*chamber \* pregnant
2. Errors are caused by the difference between English sound system and Arabic as a substitution of the letters (b) for (p) such as broble , buble (Ali, 2007:121)

Moreover, Keshavarz (1999: 28) says the spelling and pronunciation of words are another source of error. That is the learners are used to pronounce words as they are spelt , g.wild /wild / top / t>p / .Thus, he says that in English certain sounds are not pronounced they are just spelling, so the problem occurs because of silent letter. Students face problem because they are used to pronounce the word as its spelling, calm/ calm ,bomb/bomb/ (Keshavarz, 1999: 79- 80)

### c. Lexical - Semantic Errors

They result from the wrong using of a word in the sentence and this is related to the effect of the mother language (ibid: 80)

- 1- I'm working 24 o'clock each week.
- 2- My father learned me the Koran when I was child.

### d. Syntactic -Morphological Errors:

As the research focuses on errors concerning prepositions, this section will be dealt with thoroughly in the following subsections. There are several types of errors students are expected to make, and these errors can be:

### e. Omission of prepositions

Arabic's interference is obvious in the omission of some prepositions. Some of them are not in the context as a result, students omit these prepositions when they write in English. In Arabic, prepositions are not used in some context, while in English thee are necessary in a sentence. So ,students without using any preposition write similar sentences in English. The following examples show how necessary prepositions have been omitted by the students due to the effect of their mother tongue:

1. I wait few minutes -----> I wait for few minutes
2. The kinds rocks -----> The kinds of rocks.

As for writing system, Arab learners of English face more difficulty in learning the system of English since the Roman alphabet is differed from that of Arabic. Arabic has twenty-eight consonants; while English has twenty-six. Moreover, in

Arabic there is no distinction between print and script and also between upper case letters and lower ones (Scott, 1962: 10).

In addition, Keshavarz (1999: 77) says that orthographic error, the inconsistency of English spelling system is caused most of orthographic errors, e.g. backs for box. In majority cases, there is no one to one unison between letters of alphabet and sound they represent, such as:

Spelling Representation	Key Word
o	to
oo	too
wo	two

Another source of difficulty and error in English orthographic is homonyms, it occurs when we have words having the same pronunciation but different spelling and meaning, e.g. meat, meet-sea, see. Or when we have two words that have the same form or spelling but different meaning, e.g. race (people), race (competition), date (day), date (meeting), date (fruit) (ibid).

### Models of Errors Analysis

A model for error analysis is given by Corder (1967- 1974) and includes three stages:

1. Data collection :Recognizing errors
2. Description: After Recognizing errors in the data collection stage, now it's time to Describe errors in the linguistic terms and classifying them accordingly .
3. Explanation: this stage is error's analysis ultimate goal because the researcher has to give why learners make these mistakes, i.e. those errors should be traced back to their sources and also classify them accordingly whether they are interlingual, intralingual or something else.

Elissa (1997:15- 20) and Hubbard et.al. (1996:135- 141) give practical advice, and provide a clear example to identify and analyze learners' errors. The first step requires the choice of corpus of language followed by errors' identification. Errors are classified. The next step, after a grammatical analysis of each error is given, is required an explanation of different types of errors. Another model is given by Gass (2001:67) he presents six steps followed in conducting any error

analysis study, they are: Collecting errors, Identifying errors, Classifying errors , Qualifying errors , Analyzing sources of errors, Remediating errors.

### Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The data analysis comes up with the some results, they are shown in the following table:

Table (1) Error analysis of prepositions

No .	sentences	correct answer	No. of correct answers	percentage	No. of incorrect	percentage
1	We really need to start ..... ten o'clock sharp.	at	15	75 %	5	25%
2	Every year... 10th of October, the Chinese have a celebration.	on	8	40 %	12	60%
3	You must finish the work ..... seven o'clock.	at	16	80 %	4	20%
4	I haven't seen my wife ..... last spring.	since	19	95 %	1	5%
5	We have been waiting .... many hours to see the movie star, but the plane must have been behind the schedule .	for	3	15 %	17	85%
6	All went to the cinema ..... Monday.	on	18	90 %	2	10%
7	my uncle has not been here ... seven years.	for	17	85 %	3	15%
8	Helen has met many friends.... the four years she has been in America.	during	13	65 %	7	35%
9	Our team will be back..... Monday.	next	15	75 %	5	25%
10	Children like to get up early .... Christmas day.	on	6	30 %	14	70%
11	I will visit you ..... the beginning of the	at	5	25	15	75%

	weekend.			%		
12	We saw a ballet ..... Julia's Birthday.	on	4	20 %	16	80%
13	Many parents took their children ..... hands and led them .... the zoo.	by, around	16	80 %	4	20%
14	the opening speech of the meeting will be .... a little while.	after	15	75 %	5	25%
15	We are thankful .... those social workers .... their help.	to, for	6	30 %	14	70%
16	Are you doing anything special..... the weekend?	on	12	60 %	8	40%
17	our delegation went to Europe .... way of Thailand.	by	6	30 %	14	70%
18	Peter looks quite young ..... his age.	for	5	25 %	15	75%
19	he has been working .... the department since 1982.	in	10	50 %	10	50%
20	Do not believe everything you read ..... newspapers.	in	12	60 %	8	40%

The analysis of the test reveals that most of the students, i.e. (15) ones answer the sentence correctly and (5) of them incorrectly, this indicates that their wide knowledge of prepositions of time. Concerning sentence number (2), most of them answer it correctly, and (8) of them incorrectly this is due to the similarity of forms between (in) and (on). While sentence number (3) shows that (16) of the students answer it correctly and (4) of them incorrectly by using (by) instead of (at) this shows that the students overlap between these two different prepositions. Sentence number (4) shows that all students answer it correctly except one. Sentence number (5) causes a great deal of ambiguity for many students; therefore, only (3) students give the right answer, and (17) ones fail to do so. This shows that they don't take the context into consideration, whereas this sentence depends largely on the context.

On the contrary, sentence number (6), there are (18) students answer it incorrectly, one of them use (in) and others use (at). As for sentence number (7), (17) students answer it correctly they know the answer from the tense and context, and only (3) students answer it incorrectly. Two of them used (since) and one used (during) instead of (for). Concerning sentence number (8) many students, i.e. (13) ones, answer it correctly and (7) of them incorrectly. This shows that they don't master prepositions appropriately and they fail to provide the correct preposition in this context. While sentence number (9), (15) students answer it correctly and (5) of them incorrectly. They used (in, on, about) before (next Monday). They use unnecessary prepositions. Sentence number (10) seems that rarely answer correctly, just (6) students answer it correctly and (14) of them answer it incorrectly by using other alternative prepositions. This shows that they couldn't recognize between prepositions of time and place. Sentence number (11) rarely answer it correctly just (5), and (15) students answer it incorrectly this shows that their answer is not related to the context, they don't take the tense of the sentence into consideration. While sentence (12) shows that very few of them answer it correctly, Le. only (4), and (16) of them answer it incorrectly. They use other alternatives this is because the numerous number of English prepositions which results in this overlapping.

Whereas sentence (13), most students, i.e. (16) ones answer it correctly and (4) of them incorrectly. This means that the meaning of prepositions appears clearly in this sentence. Also sentence (14) was answer correctly by (15) students just (5) answer it incorrectly this is because that many prepositions, need a particular part of speech. While sentence (15) few students answer it correctly, just (6), and this is due to that many students used one preposition instead of another. Sentences (16) and (20) show that (12) of correct preposition because of the negative influence of the students' first language, Le. they translate the sentence from English into Arabic. Sentences number (17) and (18) only! (6) and (5) students answer them correctly and (14) and (15) ones incorrectly. This is also because the interference of the mother tongue, L.e. the Arabic language. Finally, in sentence number (19), we have equal result (10) students answer it correctly and (10) of them answered it incorrectly.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be noticed that students proceed further in their education but the proper use of prepositions continues to be a major problem and a hindrance to students' performance.

All students use prepositions when they speak and write, but many of them do not know The proper usage. Based on the results and analysis of the study, it can be concluded that there are a lot of serious problems facing students in using English prepositions, especially (time, place , movement) prepositions.

So it is recommended that prepositions in general should receive special attention from both parts, teachers and students. Also, emphasizing the importance of prepositions and making sure students master their use by teaching and giving more practical exercises to overcome any difficulties..

## References

- Alexander, LG.(1990) Longman English Grammar Practice. Malaysia Longman.
- All, Nabil A. (2007). Some Linguistic Problems Facing Arab Learners of English Mosul: University of Mosul Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). Aspects of The Theory of Syntax. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Corder, S. pit. (1973). Introducing Applied Linguistic. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Corder, S. pit. (1967). The Significance of Learners Errors. London: Longman.
- Corder, S. pit. (1981).Error Analysis and Interlanguage. London: Oxford University
- Crystal, D. (2008). A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics. London: Blackwell Ltd.
- Dawood, N. (1984). Syntactic Errors In Composition. Unpublished MA Thesis University of Baghdad.
- Ellis, R. (1997). SIA Research and Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Erdogan, V. (2005).Contribution of Error Analysis to Foreign Language Teaching. Mersin University Journal of The Factually of Education.
- Essberger, Josef .(2009). English Preposition list. England: Cambridge CB1 1ALT.
- Fisika, Jack (1981). Contrastive Linguistics and language Teachers. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Fries, (1940) American English Grammar. New York: A peloton-century Grafts.
- Gass, L. (1998).Rediscovery Inter Language. New York: Longman.

Habash, Zeinab Al salam .(1982). Common Errors in The Use of English Prepositions In The Written Work of UNRWA Students. Unpublished MA Thesis: Birzeit University.

Hewings, Martin.(1999). Advanced English Grammar in Use. United Kingdom: Cambridge

Hubbard, P. Jones, H, Thornton ,Band Wheeler, R. (1996).A Training Course For TEFL London: Oxford University.

Keshavarz,M,H. (1999). Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis .Tehran: Rahnama Publication.

press

Richard, J.C.(1973).Error Analysis. London: Longman.

Satalkar, Bhakti (2000). Example of Preposition. [www.Buzzle.com](http://www.Buzzle.com)

Scott,G.C.(1962). Practical Arabic. London: Longman Group Limited.

Sharif, yousef Tahaineh. (2012). Arab EFL University Students Errors in the Use of Prepositions. Amman: Jordan.

shihab, LA (1981). Error Analysis in the Written English of the Student of Science. Mosul: University of Mosul.

Takahashi, G. (1969). Preposition of Escape and Function of Certain English Prepositions. Journal Applied Linguistic.

Thomson, A.V. Martinet, A.V. (1960). A Practical English Grammar. Oxford University Press

Thomson, AJ, Martinet. A.V.(1960). A practical English Grammar. Oxford University press

Walker Elaine, Ellsworth Steve. (2000). Grammar Practice. England: Malaysia press

Yates,Jean. (1999). The Ins and outs of Prepositions. United States of America.

Zuheir, Abdul Rahman A. (1990). Analytic Study of Errors by Iraqi Students in Using English Preposition of Place Relation. University of Glasgow.