
THE USE OF ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study examined the writing skill of the students at the undergraduate level, with a special focus on the use of prepositions of place, time and direction in English. The subjects of the study comprised of 100 randomly selected undergraduate students of English literature from two Arts and Science colleges located in Coimbatore city. The data elicitation instrument was a guided cloze test in which the subjects were asked to fill the gaps using appropriate prepositions of place, time and direction. To analyze the collected data, socio-linguistic and descriptive methods were used. The results indicated that the students found more difficulties in the use of prepositions of place and direction than the prepositions of time because of their mother tongue interference. The findings imply that teachers should pay more attention while teaching the prepositions of place, time and direction and provide sufficient explanations about them to the students in the classroom.

Keywords: Preposition, Importance of writing, Socio-linguistics.

The English language has attained an international acceptance due to globalization. Most of the learners need to write and speak English fluently and accurately in the general and academic domains. To use English effectively, it is important to master the four languages skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW). Of all the four language skills, writing is considered a complex process and the most important skill for the second language learners to master. The ability to communicate ideas and information effectively through the global network is crucially dependent on good writing skills. However, second language learners are under pressure today in writing because the art of communication has become so complex in conveying their thoughts to a great growing number of English-speaking people. This is often true to those who undertake writing in English as they face difficulties in the use of prepositions particularly, of place, time and direction. The reasons behind this phenomenon are multifarious. One of the reasons for this is due to the student's lack of understanding the context in using appropriate prepositions and they do not know which preposition to use (Cabuk, 2009). The other reason is that learners face difficulties in the use of space prepositions due to influence of their native and target languages (Abdelkarim, 2008). Lack of practice is another because which makes their writing colorless, boring, and ineffective. These difficulties not only affect learners' academic success, but also hinder their professional progress which has a negative impact on their personality and overall growth.

Prepositions are the subtlest and a set of small words that are of a closed class in English language (Huddleston, 1984, p.336). They express a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence. The prepositional complement is characteristically a noun phrase, a nominal wh-clause, or a nominal -ing clause. For instance, the book is on the table, Mary is not responsible for what she did, Dylan read the manual before installing the system (Quirk et al. 1985, p.657). Prepositions do not accept new words easily, but they have notoriously polysemous behaviors in sentences. They are difficult to learn as most of them have different functions and they do not have many rules to help in choosing the right prepositions in a particular context (Swan, 2005, p.425). They combine with other parts of speech to express new meanings, and they participate in idiomatic expressions. For instance, Hewas angry at the weather and He was angry with me for failing to keep our appointment. Sometimes, one preposition comes with the verb form, another with the adjective and still another with the noun form of the root word. For instance, sympathize with someone, sympathy for someone and sympathetic to someone (Kennedy, 2003, p. 257).

Review of literature

Many studies have been done to examine the use of prepositions by second language learners. However, the present study has focused on errors particularly in the use of prepositions of place, of time and of direction. Habash (1982) has investigated the occurrence of students' errors in the use

of English prepositions and tested the relationship between the students' achievement in the English language at school and their achievement in the diagnostic test. The researcher found that the errors with spatial prepositions were more frequent than those with temporal prepositions. Reef (2000) observed the errors in the use of place prepositions and attempted to find out whether such errors were tied to poor teaching or the interference of the first language. The researcher undertook this study to find the level of competence among students in the use of the four types of prepositions namely, position/destination, relative, passage, and orientation. The results revealed that students could not clearly differentiate the four types of the prepositions and they faced difficulties in using the prepositions of position/ destination than the other types. The inability of the students to distinguish the semantic content of these prepositions and poor teaching methods employed by teachers are the major reasons for the errors.

Kim (2001) examined the errors in the use of English prepositions in the written work of Upper Secondary Malay students. The aim of the study was to identify the prepositional errors and to find out the causes for the occurrence of these errors. The researcher applied nine concepts of prepositions which pose the most of the difficulties for students namely, prepositions of place, time, direction, manner-agent, cause-purpose, similarity, association, verb-preposition, and adjective-preposition. A diagnostic test was administered to these students to elicit the data. In the test, they were required to write an essay and fill the blanks of a Cloze text

and sentences with the correct prepositions. The result of the study showed that the students made a number of errors in using the prepositions of place, time and direction due to wrong selections. The researcher suggested that the method of teaching English prepositions could play a vital role in facilitating the learning of prepositions. Rumiyati (2008) maintains that the Indonesian learners of English often find difficulties and make errors in the use of English prepositions. The main purpose of her study was to identify and classify the preposition error types. The results showed that preposition of place, time, manner, direction, purpose, measurement, similarity, capacity and association were considered difficult for the students and mastery of using prepositions were still poor. It further showed that students find remarkably more difficulties in the use of prepositions of direction (91.35%) than the other types. The researcher suggested that prepositions need more attention on teaching and learning English.

Statement of the problem

Learning to write in a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learners. They have put lots of time and efforts for acquiring the language and learning to write. In their attempt to master the writing skill, learners inevitably commit errors. One of the major difficulties with writing in English is the use of prepositions, which has been found to be a major source of errors. Since the preposition is an essential component in writing English, it will be valuable to the teachers to be familiar with types of errors. Learners make in order to reduce if not eliminate the problems in the use of appropriate prepositions according to the context. Due to the problems stated above, the present study was designed to investigate the problems encountered by the undergraduate students in the use of preposition within their writing practices.

Objective of the study

Based on the researchers' review of the literature and reported findings of the previous studies done in this area, this study aims to shed new light on the following two objectives. The present study made an attempt to identify the difficulties faced by the undergraduate students in using English prepositions while writing. The specific objective made an attempt to analyze in the use of prepositions in particular, of place, time and direction.

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant difference between gender and prepositional errors.
2. There is no significant difference between the medium of instruction and prepositional errors.

Methodology

Location

The location of the study was two Arts and Science Colleges in Coimbatore city which is approximately 7-9 kilometres away from Gandhipuram, Tamil Nadu, India. The colleges were run in two teaching sessions, namely the morning and afternoon session.

Participants

In this research paper, the researcher considered Arts and Science College students at undergraduate level as subjects

of the study. One hundred undergraduate students were selected randomly for the study. Of them, 33 were males and 67 were females. All of them were of 18-21 years of their age. The students were all from the first-year majoring in English Literature. The participants had studied the English language around the number of 12 years from the primary to the higher secondary education system.

Procedure

For the purpose of assessing students' ability in the use of prepositions of place, time and direction, the test was administered to undergraduate students from two arts and science colleges in Coimbatore city. The research with the help of the English teachers of the colleges became approachable to the students first. The students were made to feel at ease. Then the test papers were distributed to them and a thorough explanation on how to take the test was provided for them. The subjects were co-operative while administering the test. They were given 30 minutes to fill it out. The test consisted of two parts, namely a personal data sheet was developed to collect the information from the testees related to the variables and tested the performance of the subjects in the use of prepositions of place, time and direction.

Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, the present study analysed the prepositional errors particularly of place, time and direction, committed by the undergraduate students while writing. The study was a quantitative, in-depth enquiry as the interpretation of the data collected from the undergraduate students to find out the reasons and overcome the problems in the use of prepositions. The students found difficulties in the proper use of prepositions of place, time and direction in the given Cloze test. They had problems with choosing the preposition due to the confusion of selecting the correct preposition. The prepositions were familiar to the students but it was difficult for them to place it properly in the sentences. To determine the differences between gender and the medium of instruction on prepositional errors and in comparison, with the students' overall scores on the Cloze test was quantified and compared. Of the total 100 respondents, 33% were male and 67% were female. Among them, 24 (72.72%) of the male respondents were deemed 'poor' having scored below 6; and 6 (18.18%) adjudged 'below average' with the scores from 7-12; and there were 3 (9.09%) students who recorded 'average'

having scored 13-18. None of them attained 'good' with scores from 19-24 on the task. Among female testees, 25 (37.31%) were considered 'poor' having scored 6 or less than 6; 31 (46.27%) 'below average' and 11 (16.42%) 'average'. Like the males, none of them scored 'good' with scores from 19-24.

However, male and female students committed errors in the use of prepositions of place, time and direction. In addition, the result showed that male students were facing more difficulties in the use of prepositions of place, time and direction as compared to the female learners. The reason for the performance may be the complexity of the rules regarding the usage and the placement of English preposition does contribute to apply the wrong preposition by learners in their target language. The other reason showed their lack of knowledge in the use of preposition and their inability to successfully follow and understand the construction. In addition to this, negligence could be that the students might have not learned intensively in the classroom.

Conclusion

The present study made an attempt to find out the difficulties in the use of prepositions in particular, of place, time and direction while writing. The research findings revealed that the undergraduate students at the Department of English encountered serious difficulties in using these types of prepositions. The reason for the errors was testees' lack of understanding the usage and the inability to use an appropriate preposition to produce meaningful sentences. The errors committed by the testees were related to syntax and semantics due to the lack of knowledge and practice in L2. The incorrect choice of functional category leads to the distraction of the meaning, which is influenced by L1 in the L2 context. The given hypothesis proved that gender and the medium of instruction had significant impact in the wrong use of prepositions while writing in English. The researcher found that the respondents committed more errors in the use of prepositions of place and direction rather than prepositions of time. The present study corroborates with Raqmiyat's (2008) findings of preposition, where she says that the students find difficulties in the use of prepositions of direction than the other types. The result also supports the findings of Habash (1982), who claimed that the errors with spatial prepositions were more frequent in number in those with temporal prepositions. However, the result contradicts with the Ahmad's (2011) findings. He claimed that students faced more difficulties in learning prepositions of time and were confused while using prepositions in their writings.

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