

Errors in the Use of Prepositions and Adverb Particles by Arab ESL Speakers: Performance Analysis Perspective

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Abstract

This research aims at exploring the errors made by Arab Postgraduate Students at USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) in Malaysia in the use of prepositions and adverb particles, as speakers of English as a second language (ESL) from a performance analysis perspective. More specifically, this study was an attempt to investigate the frequency, kind and any developmental tendencies of these errors. The results of this research revealed that Arab ESL speakers committed varied kinds of errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. The number of the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles were analyzed and conclusions were produced based on the nature of error. Analysis of the corpus revealed that errors made were, mainly, based on the function and replacement of the prepositions and adverb particles. This study is a qualitative study.

Keywords: Prepositions, Adverb particles, Errors analysis, ESL learning contexts

1. Introduction

As observed in varied English as second language situations, acquiring prepositions and adverb particles usage is challenging to ESL speakers and users, whether in foreign or Arab countries. It is because ESL speakers do not possess the mastery over the language, particularly, the use of prepositions and adverb particles. However, the situation is more problematic in learning contexts where English Language is the medium of interaction and used for the taught subjects at schools and colleges. Despite the fact that prepositions and adverb particles are significant structural elements, they are essential discursual devices, reinforced by the fact they are basic components in producing written texts (Carmen, 2004). Thus, unlike content- words' function, words like prepositions and adverb particles are usually not overlooked by learners when processing language mainly for meanings in communication. Prepositions and adverb particles do somewhat impede comprehension and understanding, for in produced written texts, they are basically stressed and audible. Yet, introducing the fact that they are considered as one of the furthestmost used components in English language; it is very crucial ESL speakers or graduates do not possess the mastery, knowledge, and awareness concerning the function of preposition (Carmen, 2004).

The prepositions System in English Language that includes components such as in , at , on , of , by , into , onto , around , and adverb particles like down , up , over , off , is quite confusing and challenging to learn for both speakers of English as a second language and beginners acquiring English as a foreign language. Prepositions and adverb particles are considered by many scholars as problematic and confusing not only for language users but also for ESL teachers, particularly those whose native languages' prepositions and adverb particles system is different or have no such functional words that function differently from English Language prepositions and adverb particles.

According to Cuyckens and Radden 2002 prepositions and adverb particles in English Language demonstrate varied meanings in which some of them are very challenging and need high cognitive and mental work from language users' part. The prepositions reflect practical link between items in real life situation or use in terms of time, place and linguistic function (Dirven, 1993; Eastwood, 2006). Prepositions such as in , at , on , and adverb particles were found to be more difficult than articles. That is, prepositions are very challenging and more difficult than they appear since they convey syntactic and semantic functions (Bruce, 1976). Prepositions and adverb particles in Arabic language are similar in function to prepositions English language in terms of significance and connotation but not being multiple, but greatly differ in form.

While prepositions in Arabic language establish a single difference for general prepositional usage, the prepositions structure in English language shows a binary distinction. The general distinction of prepositions in Arabic language manifested by the preposition /fe/ presenting the use of both general and exact corresponds to English manifested by /in/, /at/ general and exact, or /in/ and /on/ in the sense of spatial expression. That is, although the notion is found in the two language systems, the general use of prepositions in English language is manifested by some lexical objects including /in/, /on/, /at/ where the case in Arabic language

is different. It is established by the lexical item /fe/ to mark the usage status respectively. This situation may be observed in terms of translation equivalents as depicted in the examples below provided from both Arabic and English languages.

- i) Gutla thubaan filalbait (Arabic Language)
A snake was killed in / at the house (English Language)
- ii) Wajdutu rajulun filtareeq (Arabic Language)
I met a man in/on the way (English Language)

In spite of the incessant efforts by ESL instructors to eliminate prepositions and adverb particles errors, they are realized to cause severe problems and challenges for language users whether at the level of speaking or writing. In this connection, this research is an attempt to errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles by Arab postgraduate students at USM.

2. The Objectives of the Study

This study examines the learning and acquisition of the English Prepositions and Adverb Particles by a cross section of Arabs as users' of ESL. It has three main objectives:

- i) To determine the types and sources of the errors Arab students make in the use of Prepositions and Adverb Particles in ESL.
- ii) To find out whether there are any implications in the relative frequency of the occurrence of these errors.
- iii) To find out whether there are any differences in the users' errors.
- iv) To find out whether there is a relationship between the produced text length and number of errors made in the use of Prepositions and Adverb Particles.

3. The Research Questions

The present researcher addresses the following questions:

Q1: What are the types and sources of the errors Arab students make in the use of Prepositions and Adverb Particles in ESL?

Q2: Are there any implications in the relative frequency of the occurrence of these errors?

Q3: Are there any differences in the users' errors?

Q4: Is there a relationship between the produced text length and number of errors made in the use of Prepositions and Adverb Particles?

4. Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted to examine the use of prepositions and adverb particles by ESL users and producers as a part of a morpheme study. However, these researches have been found to focus on isolated features of the English language prepositions and adverb particles system. This was revealed in many studies (Habash, 1982; Radden, 1989; Abdullah, 1999; Kemmerer, 2004; and Omar, 2005). Consequently, much research yielded significant findings were particularly conducted to examine functional words.

This overuse of prepositions and adverb particles and the under use of in, on, at, and of, off, down, over, up in particular, and others at the advanced level would suggest that these prepositions and adverb particles are a kind of late acquisition. The findings of earlier research indicated that ESL users who belong to different linguistic backgrounds face serious and difficult problems with regard to the use of prepositions and adverb particles. Prepositions and adverb particles are very significant linguistic structures because they carry syntactic and semantic functions (Omar, 2005).

That is, ESL users should be able to use them correctly in order to avoid confusions and meanings interruption. In addition, research findings on the function of prepositions and adverb particles showed that many language users experienced significant improvement after implementing a systematic instructional approach and using self-developed materials while teaching ESL (Kemmerer, 2004).

5. Procedures and Methods

The sample of this study comprised 45 Arab postgraduates from different faculties at USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) Penang, Malaysia. The sample of the study included both males and females. All of them were users of ESL. They started their degree in 2012, 2013. The sample of the study included both freshmen and seniors. The study comprised the following nationalities; Jordan, Yemen, Palestine, and Others (such as Libya, Egypt, Iraq) as presented in figure (1) below:

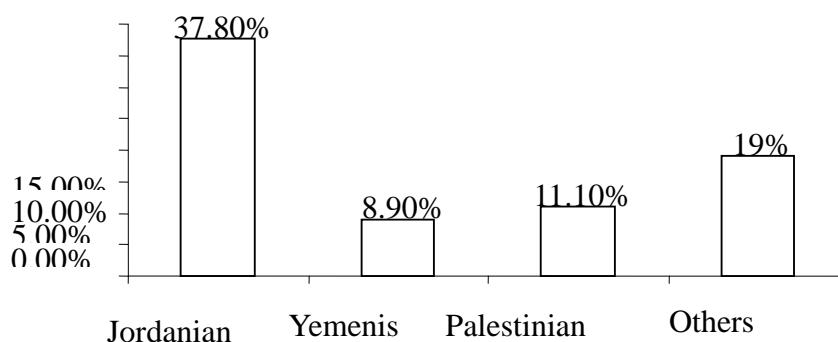


Figure (1). Presents the Respondents Nationality Percentages

The age of the students ranges between 26 and 45 years. They were selected randomly for the study. Females composed 42.2%, and Males 57.8% percent. However, 45% percent were postgraduates in which 60% were graduates. All of them used ESL. They belong to the same linguistic background (Arabic Language). The participants of the study were encouraged to produce texts and answer a number of questions through a questionnaire survey about their awareness, misuse, confusion and knowledge of prepositions and adverb particles. The average length of the produced text and class level were the only two variables. The analysis

included the work of all the participants. Therefore, 95.6% percent of the respondents provided the answer (yes) about their awareness and knowledge of prepositions, and 4.4% of them were (No) as demonstrated in Figure (2) in this section:

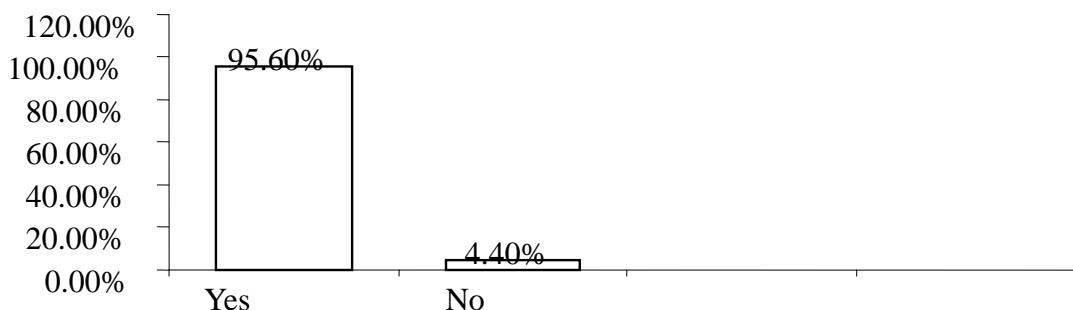


Figure (2). Presents Respondents Awareness and Knowledge of Prepositions

But regarding the misuse and confuse of prepositions 73.3% percent of the respondents answered with (Yes), and 26.7% percent were (No). In respect to their confuse and misuse of prepositions, 93.3% percent of them gave the answer between (in/at, and on /in) as locative and spatial prepositions, and 6.7% percent showed between (of/off). However with regard to prepositions importance in their daily English communication 91.1% percent answered (Yes), and 8.9% percent provided (No) answer. In addition to that, respondents were asked about the period of time of using English in term of years, 11% were less than 1 year, 17.8% 1-2 years, 15.6% 3-5 years, and 55.6% more than 5 years .This could be shown in Figure (3) in the next section:

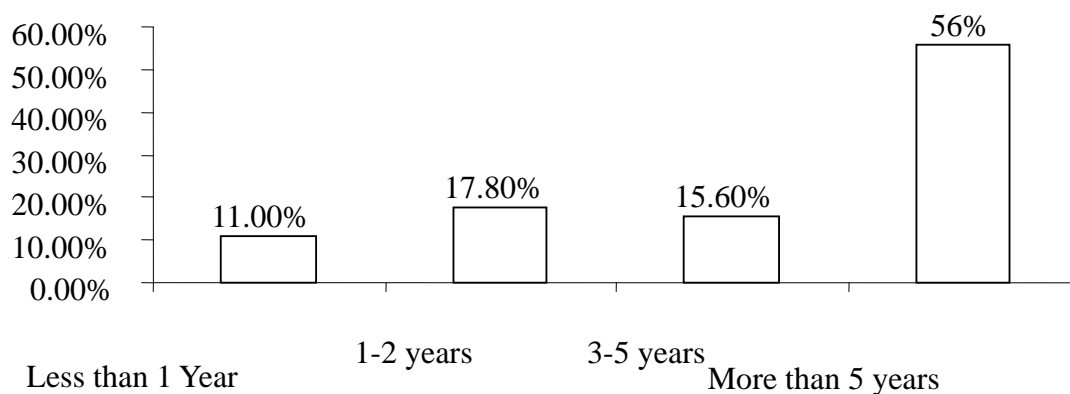


Figure (3). Shows the Respondents' Number of Years as Users of English Language

The produced texts were all written in 45– minutes as the normal lecture time, and questionnaires were left with open time. The students were allowed to ask each other. For every produced text and question, a word count was conducted to analyze and process the

frequencies produced throughout the use of prepositions and adverb particles across the text. The analyses of the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles were based on the length of written text and questionnaires. The questionnaire included items related to ESL users' awareness, knowledge, and importance of prepositions and adverb particles. Then, the percentage of the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles by ESL was recorded based on their response to the questionnaire. The linguistic analysis of the produced texts and questionnaires related the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles to many causes. These causes include:

- (i) The inter-lingual or intercommunicative errors caused by the users' native language interference.
- (ii) Usage and training errors.
- (iii) The faulty presentations of the training materials by the language trainers.
- (iv) The use of English within particular linguistic situations.
- (v) Second language communication strategies by which users and learners attempt to tackle the loaded interaction encountering them.

Thus, the analysis of the data was cross-validated by checking each produced text and answered question was analyzed and studied once, or twice by the present researcher. Data from each produced text and answered question were organized using the following error categories which are interrelated:

- (i) Substitution of the preposition in for at, and in for on in certain contexts.
- (ii) The use of the preposition at to indicate days and items, in to show exact date and days, on for time.
- (iii) Replacement of the preposition in by on as indicators of certain objects like, days seasons, years, items or date.
- (iv) Substitution of the preposition on by onto in appropriate sentences.
- (v) The use of the preposition into in place of in or reverse them.
- (vi) The unawareness of the use of prepositions as which one stands for specific or general purpose in the case of in, on, at.
- (vii) The mix up in the use of the preposition of and the adverb off as which one to use in particular structure. Also, the misuse and confuse in the usage of the prepositions and adverb particles down, up with under and above.

6. Discussion and Findings

This section discusses the findings of the research. It provides a discussion on the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles based on their possible sources and types. It also analyzes the occurrences of these errors based on the collected data (questionnaires and written text).

6.1 Errors Types

The analysis of the findings in the current research indicated that ESL users committed eight different types in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. This includes the substitution of the preposition in for at, and in for on in certain contexts. The findings show that this kind of substitution occurred with both seniors and freshmen. The occurrence of these errors relates basically to native language interference or the learners' knowledge inadequacy of the target language, or even the multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions:

- (i) I saw a boy [in / on the way].
- (ii) The book is [on / at the table].
- (iii) I have a class [in / on Monday].
- (iv) I was born [in / on 2nd April].
- (v) The girl is going [in / into the class].
- (vi) The flower pot has fallen [on / onto my head].

Where a significant number of errors made by the subjects through substituting in by on, on by at whose use is obligatory locative or spatial with object of preposition [place –way] for on not for in ; and on with the [item, the table] not in , or the case for the exact [date, 2nd April]on not in which would be used for general things like month, year ,or place. Thus, English requires the use of the prepositions in for general usage and on for exact purpose but Arabic not. Due to the aforesaid dissimilarities or differences between the two languages, Arabic doesn't have distinct markers for prepositions exact and general usage compared to that of English language. This may lead to the incorrect use of prepositions and adverb particles. This assumption is further supported by the work of scholars such as (Rice, 1996; Vandeloise, 1999; Thomson & Martinet, 2009) who state that similar errors were made by producers and users of Arabic and other international languages. They point out that these languages might not have corresponding prepositions system. The other possible source of errors in the process of simplification is the attempt of ESL users to reduce the acquisition load. They may be using prepositions like in, on, and at differently for succeeding the communication process.

Substitution of the prepositions of by the adverb off, and similarly down, up, over, around, and when to consider them as prepositions or adverb particles within the structure is also another crucial problem here. These crucial errors may seem flexible enough to discuss but very challenging and problematic in reality. This inadequacy may relates to the native language interference and ESL users' unawareness the English word class, knowledge of these functional words, and multiple meanings of prepositions.

This explanation seems very ideal for the difficulty in learning prepositions such as in, at, on, of, onto, into and adverb particles like down, over, up and off where some of them could be applicable as prepositions as well. They are considered as inseparable indicators for time, seasons, years, months, places, and items in most of the situations and purposes(locative and

spatial), whether exact or general. This conclusion may make the learners assume that the use of prepositional words in, on, at, onto, into and of is for all cases regardless of the purpose, object, and situation stands for as well the case for other prepositions and adverb particles.

In addition, users of ESL are also misled by the presentation of English language teaching materials in the classroom setting. Some teachers may teach prepositions to their students orally. This leads them to reality shock when they practice writing and get confuse and misuse prepositions with adverb particles, particularly whenever the learners or users can not differentiate between prepositions and adverb particles. This may include components such as down, up and over as adverb particles as demonstrated in the examples below:

- (i) The boy lives up / down the road. [preposition]
(ii) He looked up / down. [Adverb particles]

It is worth noting that these errors are subsequent to that of prepositions and adverb particles usage /use unawareness, and knowledge, specially when it comes to the word class type which the producers fail to realize that these features are not separate entity from the word class (noun / verb) and have structural implication as modifying verbs or nouns and, thus, continues to produce ungrammatical structures.

In connection, this part of the findings presents the percentage of the producers' errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. The participants made erroneous errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles in which freshmen appear to make a lot of errors than seniors in erroneous substitution of prepositions themselves and adverb particles on the other hand as (93.3% percent) were their frequency. This means that freshmen made more errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles than seniors who showed else than that. They also identified the similarities between adverb particles and prepositions in terms of form but not function. Both freshmen and seniors recorded substitution errors in the use of some prepositions such as of, in, at, on but this did not seem like a slip of a pen or nonce mistake.

Furthermore, the learners or producers made many errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles in their application with time, places, date, seasons, years, or items (locative and spatial). These errors may be better explained as being caused by the other target language structures analogy and overgeneralization. The producers were possibly applying the rules of native and target languages where they are not applicable. In addition, the unawareness, hypercorrection, or the producers' tendencies to excessively use prepositions and adverb particles in unnecessary places may lead to communication interruption and errors. These errors refer to the learners' unawareness and carelessness.

6.2 The Effect of the Subjects Level

The participants made a total of 93.3% percent of errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. This showed that the performance of ESL users differed from one to another. That is, participants who did well in specific situations had some difficulties in other cases. The percentage shows that producers and users' performance varies considerably in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. All the subjects consistently did not do better with regard

to the use of prepositions in some cases. But they used certain prepositions and adverb particles in other cases very well. Participants in this aspect recorded a total error percentage of 93.3%. In conclusion, seniors showed higher performance in the use of prepositions and adverb particles as well as in the misuse and confuse between in, at, on, and substitution of the preposition of by the adverb particle off compared to freshmen.

6.3 *The Correlation between the Number of Errors and the Produced text Length*

In this regard, the findings of the research showed a consistent relationship between the length of the text and errors made by the participants. Freshmen recorded 178 errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles compared to the text length which is 150 words, whilst seniors recorded 87 errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles for the same text length. This shows there is a strong correlation between the number of errors and the length of the produced text.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research investigated the errors in the use of prepositions and adverb particles by Arab postgraduates as speakers of ESL at USM. The findings of the research indicated that most of the errors in the use of prepositions by ESL speakers relate to the following causes:

- a) The inter-lingual or intercommunicative errors caused by the users' native language interference.
- b) Usage and training errors.
- c) The faulty presentations of the training materials by the language trainers.
- d) The use of English within particular linguistic situations.
- e) Second language communication strategies by which users and learners attempt to tackle the loaded interaction encountering them.

Most of these errors occurs when using prepositions such as /in/, /into/ and /at / equals / Fe/, /onto/ and /on/ equals /ala/ in Arabic where the preposition /of/ left with no equivalent, due to its varied structural function. In addition, prepositions in Arabic Language are not of multi-meanings and functions the way English is.

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