

**ERRORS IN THE USAGE OF PREPOSITION IN ENGLISH
COMPOSITION: A STUDY OF PAKISTANI COLLEGE LEVEL
LEARNERS**

Muhammad Qasim¹

¹Department of English Literature and Applied Linguistics University of Balochistan Quetta

Accepted on: December: 02/2020.

Published on: December: 10/2020.

ABSTRACT

The correct use of preposition is important for EFL learners. This paper is aimed at finding and analyzing prepositional errors and also describing the causes and sources of prepositional errors in EFL college students' descriptive writing. This study is descriptive both in mode and nature. The population for this study was 72 second year college students (both boys and girls) of degree colleges Pishin, Balochistan in the academic year 2018/2019. The researcher used purposive/purposeful sampling for data collection. The findings discovered that errors in the use of preposition (in) were found more often than errors in the use of preposition at, on, for, by or with. The errors were classified into four categories; misformation errors, addition errors, omission errors and misordering errors. The study also found that the influence of students' first language was the main factor in occurrence of preposition errors in writing.

KEYWORDS: Process, Writing Preposition, Preposition, Analysis Influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are the only creatures who require language as a tool to communicate (Dewey, 2007). It is language that helps us to convey our feelings, thoughts or opinions to others. The ability to convey our feelings, thoughts or opinions without an error is referred as language performance (Booth & Colomb, 2003). For the proper use of a language, acquiring language competence is mandatory. Language competence has got four components as well called skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Sarfaraz, 2011). Khansir (2012) has divided these skills into two categories namely receptive and productive. Receptive skill covers listening and reading, while speaking and writing is represented by productive skill (Bilal et al, 2013). In productive skill, many scholars like Sarfaraz (2011) believe that writing is an ability because unlike speaking, writing is an indirect communication which requires ample knowledge and practice.



Khansir (2012) defines writing as an indirect expression of ideas in an organized and consecutive way. In accordance with graphic convention of language, the basic aim of writing is to express ideas in a polished written form which requires a refined sentence structure and the proper use of vocabulary (Byren, 1996). To conclude writing can be rendered as a structured activity of words to record ideas on a piece of paper.

Every language has got certain set of symbols or letters to represent words and their related meanings (Khan, 2011). In a broader sense these signs are termed as language components which include phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, grammar and other components. The knowledge of these components is essential to convey a message both verbal and written. Grammar is one of the most important components of a language which covers certain aspects of language such as noun, verb, preposition, plural and singulars, and tense (Bilal et al, 2013). Some of them are small by size like preposition but have equally important role in language. Due to its essential role and tricky use, preposition has always been a major problem for foreign language learners (EFL) (Bilal et al, 2013). They often commit preposition errors which results poor performance in writing.

Preposition is a word that shows the relation of two words or which connects one thing with another (Seaton & Mew, 2007). It is always either followed by noun or pronoun. It is also defined as a word to express relation between different things or thoughts and is used before noun or pronoun (Brown, 2004). Preposition has got three main kinds in English language such as preposition of time, preposition of place and preposition of direction (Sudhakaran, 2015). Every kind of preposition has got its own function and use.

The foreign language learners often fail to understand the correct use of preposition and get confused in understanding its meaning and function. That is why EFL learners get misled in conveying a purported message. For instance, students misuse preposition of place, as “The inkpot is above the cupboard” instead of “The inkpot is on the cupboard” to mean that the inkpot is located on the surface of the cupboard. In this case the listener/reader will think that the inkpot is flying or hanging. Another simple example is when a student says “The white box is below the black box” instead of “The black box is under the white box” to mean that black box is resting on the surface of white box. Or if a student says that “The black box is below the white box” it means there is a visible space in between the boxes.

Prepositional error is often caused by first language interference (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012). It is therefore essential for EFL learners not to depend on first language knowledge about preposition. If EFL students assume semantic sameness between the target language



and their first language, it definitely results committing error in preposition. EFL learners always use preposition incorrectly because English as a target language has got too many differences and too little similarities with learner's mother tongue. To conclude EFL learner has to acquire ample knowledge about preposition and its use for better writing output.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are EFL learners' errors in the use of preposition in English composition?
2. What are the major causes of errors in the use of preposition in EFL learners' composition?

2. LITTERER REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Error

Error is generally defined as an unacceptable deviation from the standard version of English language (Fisiak, 1981). British English and standard American English are worldwide acclaimed to be standard English versions (Sudhakaran, 2015). Although, English have produced numerous verities, but the deviation from the roles of afermentioned English versions, is considered as error (Sarfraz, 2011). Error making in English language is inevitable. Since, most of the EFL students find the term error confusing and mistake it for mistake. It is therefore, important here to differentiate between error and mistake.

Corder(1981) distinguishes between error and mistake. Error, according to corder, is a regular pattern of learner's production differing from the real model of target language. The underlying competence of learner' is revealed through their regular pattern. Corder believes that the main difference between error and mistake is that mistake is a slip of tongue or memory lapses and can be removed while error remains constant part of learners' production in target language. Therefore, a learner may letter on become conscious of the mistake he/she has made while emanating from impulses, and hence remove it. But in case of error, the learner is completely ignorant of the error he has committed and thinks that he/she has used the right pattern.

2.1 Error Types

Corder (1981) classifies error into two categories namely; interlingual errors and interalingual errors. Interlingual errors are defined as errors that come as a result of conflict between the learner's mother tongue and the target language while interalingual errors are errors that learners commit in target language such as overgeneralization, simplification or



the other wrong uses of analogies. On other hand, Dulay and Burt (1982) classified errors into three categories namely: developmental errors, interference errors and unique errors. Developmental errors like L1 learning errors are those errors which occur in target language as a result of the conflict between learner's mother tongue and target language. The interference errors are errors which are made by learners in the structure of target language; and those errors which are neither developmental errors nor interference errors, are called unique errors.

2.3 Error analysis

Error analysis, in linguistics, is generally defined as a tool to study, discover, classify and systematically analyze unacceptable forms used by EFL learners in the light of linguistic principles and procedures (Crystal, 2003). In other words, error analysis is a way of determining the occurrences, nature, causes and effects of ineffective language (James, 2001).

Keshavarz (1999) defined error analysis as a process of collecting learners' language samples, identifying, classifying and evaluating them in accordance with the seriousness of their nature. However, Ellis (2008) categorizes error analysis into a four step process of language correction as identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. In short, error analysis is a way to identify and rectify EFL errors.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study the researcher used quantitative research method which refers to a kind of research method that is a systematic investigation of phenomena while collecting quantifiable data under the shell of certain statistical and mathematical techniques (Dornyei, 2007). Quantitative research collects data from different sources using different sampling methods. Same in this study, the researcher used purposive data sampling for data collection.

In this study, the process of data collection comprises of a single quantitative phase. In quantitative phase, the researcher selected 72 respondents from various degree colleges (both boys and girls) located in district Pishin, Balochistan. The respondents were asked to write an essay of about 250 to 300 words on one of the two provided topics.

The researcher analyzed the data using 'descriptive statistics' and counted the frequencies and percentages as needed. The procedure comprised several steps: checking



learners' essays: coding the errors and presenting the frequencies and percentages. The method is based on Corder's three stepped method for error analysis which comprised the collection of data, identification and description of errors found in collected data. The frequencies and percentages of the data were properly codified with the help of MS Excel sheet to avoid error.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of the study discovered that prepositional errors found in participants' writing are classified into several categories; errors in the use of in, on, at, for and with. These errors are checked from the perspective of four main error kinds; misformation errors, addition errors omission errors and misordering errors. Students often make aforesaid errors in preposition while writing. The findings of this study also proved that the participants committed a number of above mentioned errors in preposition. In table 1.1, data shows that the errors found in participants' writing are categorized as preposition in, at, on, for and with. As the table 1.1 also indicates that errors in preposition "in" occurred 154(22.51%), at 142(20.76%), on 139(20.32%), for 127(18.56%) and with 122(17.83%) times. This study found errors in only these five prepositions. The researcher divided all preposition errors into four types such as misformation, addition, omission and disordering errors.

Table 1.1

No		MF	OM	Ad	MO	Frequencies	Percentages
1.	In	75	45	25	09	154	22.51%
2.	At	60	45	41		142	20.76%
3.	on	49	48	42		139	20.32%
4.	For	42	48	37		127	18.56
5.	With	43	41	38		122	17.83
Total						684	

Based on findings, the researcher found "in" as the most problematic preposition in students' essays. It was therefore, divided into two sub categories such as substitution of "at" for "in" and "on" for "in". It shows that the use of "in" is taken over by preposition "at" or "on". The context needed preposition "in", but the participant used "at" and "on" instead.

Likewise, the study also found addition, omission and disordering errors in the findings. In following, the study gives a detail description of errors being occurred in participants' writing.

1. Errors in Preposition “In”

i. Misformation Error in Preposition “In”

Preposition is defined as a word that shows the relation between a noun or pronoun with another word. Preposition “in” and “at” come in the sub kinds of preposition as preposition of time and place. The use of both “in” and “at” is same but tricky to understand. However, preposition “in” is used for more general (space), while preposition “at” is used for more specific point (place or time). It is always seen that students substitute “in” for, at or another preposition. In students' essays, there were a number of error cases where prepositions “in” is used incorrectly. For instance: a) He lives in Quetta in Shahbaz town in Block B No.3, b) You will find the beautiful scene Gilgith highway and I think it is in the hills, c) Firstly, he does all his daily activities in study to assignments. In above mentioned examples, students have tried to use preposition “in” in place of other prepositions.

ii. Addition Errors in Preposition “In”

Preposition “in” is a preposition of place, which is used to indicate a location, inclusion or position. The unnecessary addition of “in” in a sentence is regarded as addition error in preposition “in”. Based on findings, students essays reflected a number of addition errors in the use of preposition “in”. The following example from students' essays show the addition error in preposition “in”. a) We love in their company. Preposition “in” as mention above, should be used for an inclusion or position. So, in the example, “in” is not used for inclusion or a specific position but rather it is used for something else which is incorrect. The student had better omitted it in the sentence.

iii. Omission Errors in Preposition “in”

Students often omit preposition when it is necessary to use. The omission of any word (here preposition) in a sentence, makes the sense wrong. So, in accordance with language rules omitting a word is termed as omission error and omission of preposition is called as omission error in preposition. The following example clearly shows omission error in preposition “in”; Ali kept on knocking at the door but there was no one. In this example the student has omitted preposition “in”. The student had better written this way: Ali kept on knocking at the door but there was no one in.



iv. Misordering Errors in Preposition “in”

Misordering error is type of error in which the student uses a word (here preposition) in wrong sentence order. EFL learners, specifically the beginners often use preposition “in” in a wrong sentence order due lack of grammatical knowledge and lack of writing practice. Based on findings, the researcher revealed that participants used preposition “in” in an incorrect order in their sentences. The following example clearly shows the above-mentioned error: Last Sunday, he went and closed the door behind in. In this statement the use of preposition “in” is used in a wrong order. The student had better used preposition “in” this way, Last Sunday, he went in and closed the door behind.

2. Errors in the Use of Preposition “at”

i. Misformation Errors

Preposition “at” is used denoting a specific point or scale. In the study, it is found that students have used it incorrectly. EFL/ESL learners often use preposition “at” in sentences when any other preposition such as in, on at or for, is needed. Based on analysis, the study discovered that participants’ essays reflected a number of misformation errors in preposition “at”. The following examples clearly show above mentioned errors; I think, she will continue her school at university, b) Ali is good at cricket.

ii. Addition Errors Addition of “at”

Preposition “at” has also got the same case, as the use of preposition “in” which is used while it is not needed. The study also found that students in certain context made errors in preposition “at”; Due to her extraordinary performance, her school team will win at this tournament. In this example the use of preposition “at” is therefore incorrect that according to rules ‘this’ should not be followed by preposition “at” because it works as preposition. So, the student had better omitted preposition “at” from the sentence.

iii. Omission Errors Omission of “at”

Students often omit preposition when it is required to use in a sentence. The omission of preposition (here preposition “at”) in a sentence makes the sentence wrong. So, according language rules, omitting a preposition is called misformation error in preposition. The following example clearly highlights omission error in preposition “at”: Their families live Conway House. In this example the student has omitted preposition “at”. The student had better write this way: Their families live at Conway House.



3. Errors in the Use of Preposition “On”

i. Misformation Error in Preposition “On”

Preposition “on” as already mentioned is a part of preposition of place which is used for the surface of something or place (Crystal, 2003). For street or avenue, “on” means a point which is close to the street. This study found that EFL/ESL students used preposition “on” indicating inclusion, position or location of something or someone. The following examples taken from students’ essays show the aforesaid error: a) She never talks loudly on my presence, b) Sabira came on my room to persuade me for the trip. Example (a) points out the location and possession of the director himself. Therefore, preposition “in” fits here better than any other preposition.

ii. Addition Errors in Preposition “On”

Preposition “on” as a preposition of place, is often added in sentences when it is not required. The unnecessary addition of “on” in a sentence is regarded as addition error in preposition “on”. Based on findings, students’ essays reflected a number of addition errors in the use of preposition “on”. The following example from students’ essays show the addition error in preposition “on”. a) This book has three volumes on. Preposition “on” as mentioned above, should be used to indicate a position or surface. In this example, “in” is not used for a specific position or a surface rather it is unnecessarily used and doesn’t give any sense. The sentence would have been correct if the student had not used it in the sentence.

iii. Omission Errors in Preposition “On”

EFL learners often omit preposition when it is necessary to use in a sentence. The omission of preposition “on” is often seen in students’ writing. Based on findings, the researcher found a number of omission errors in participants’ essays. The following example taken from student’s essays show omission error in preposition “on”, In the story, the passenger beseeched the criminal to have pit, him. In this sentence the student has omitted preposition “on”. The student had better write this way: In the story, the passenger beseeched the criminal to have pity on him.

4. Errors in the Use of Preposition “For”

i. Misformation Errors in Preposition “For”

Preposition “for” is a function word, usually used for a purpose. It is also used to indicate the object or recipient of a perception, activity or desire. Based on findings, students’ essays’ reflected a number of misformation errors in the use of preposition “for”. The findings



revealed that EFL/ESL students misspelled preposition “for” and was replaced by the noun “fore” which gives totally different meaning. The following examples taken from students’ essays show the aforesaid error: a) She didn’t have a choice to choose it fore herself.

ii. Addition Errors in Preposition “For”

Preposition “for” is usually used for a purpose or reason but it is often added in sentences when it is not required. The unnecessary addition of “for” makes the sentence wrong and doesn’t give the purported meaning. Such errors are regarded as addition errors in preposition “for”. Based on findings, students’ essays reflected a number of addition errors in the use of preposition “for”. For instance: He was ready to take for action. In this example, “for” is unnecessarily used and not only made the sentence grammatically wrong but gave a wrong sense. The student had better not used “for” in the sentence.

iii. Omission Error in Preposition “For”

The word “for” is used both as a preposition and as a conjunction in English language. In both cases, it has a vital role to play in the production of correct sentences. In spite of its importance, EFL/ESL learners often omit preposition “for” when it is necessary to use in a sentence. Based on findings, students’ essays reflected a number of omission errors. The following example shows how students have omitted preposition “for” and could not produce correct and meaningful sentence. The student has written: People around the world read such books.... entertainment. It would have been correct if the student had written it this way: People around the world read such books for entertainment.

5. Errors in the Use of Preposition “With”

i. Misformation Errors in Preposition “With”

Preposition “with” like for, is a function word used to indicate a participant in an action, transaction or arrangement. It is also used to indicate the object of attention, feeling or behavior. Based on findings, students’ essays reflected numerous information errors while using preposition “for”. The findings discovered that EFL/ESL students misformed preposition “with” which not only changed the meaning of the sentence but also made the sentence grammatically wrong. The following examples taken from students’ essays show the aforementioned error: she could not give presentation weigh her eyes open.

ii. Addition Errors in Preposition “With”



Preposition “with” is an opposite word to “against” and usually used to show the closeness of a participant in an action. In spite, its illustrated rule, EFL/ESL beginners often use it in addition in sentences. The unnecessary addition of “with” makes the sentence wrong and doesn’t give the desired meaning. Such errors are regarded as addition errors in preposition “with”. Based on findings, students’ essays reflected a number of addition errors in the use of preposition “with”. For instance: On that morning, the bus left with on time. In this example, “with” is unnecessarily used the student had better not used “with” in this sentence.

iii. Omission Error in Preposition “with”

The importance of preposition “with” cannot be denied in the production of correct sentences. It is often seen that ESL/EFL students omit “with” when it is required to use in a sentence.

Based on findings, student omitted preposition “with” many times in their essays. The following example shows how students have omitted preposition “with” and committed omission error. A student has written: his performance in class varied ...class strength. It would have been better if the student had written it this way: his performance in class varied with class strength.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on findings, the study found that students committed a number of preposition errors in writing. These errors prove that EFL/ESL learners should try to focus on the improvement of writing. And the EFL teachers should infuse the ability in students to write in error-free English. In fact, writing skill is often challenging for EFL learners especially for the beginners.

They make lots of grammatical errors. But if they don’t overcome error making in writing in the initial stages, it will remain with them forever and difficult to remove.

The incorrect use of preposition “in” remained one of the most challenging and frequently committed error in the study. It occurred for 154(22.51%) times. Such a large number of errors occurred in preposition “in” shows that preposition “in” is mostly used incorrectly by EFL learners. In the findings we came up with a number of cases where the participants used preposition “in” with numbers, addresses or names. In some cases preposition “in” was placed before the name of the day in order to explain the position of



something on the top or on the surface of something. In first case preposition “at” and in latter preposition “on” is the correct preposition to be used. It is important for EFL learners to know the use of preposition “in” with exact addresses (have house numbers), is incorrect. Likewise, the general rule for preposition “on” is to use it for a location or a general location with boundaries (On Quetta is wrong).

The study also found that preposition “at” occurred 142 (20.76%) times as a second most frequent error. The EFL learners used preposition “at” incorrectly or substituted it for other prepositions. Same was the case with “in” and “at”, the students used “at” for “in” or “to”. In some cases students have used preposition “at” together with “this”. As a rule, preposition “at” is not used when we say this, next, last or every. For instance; a) She goes to Kabul at every December, b) Due to her extraordinary performance, her college team will win at this tournament.

Apart from preposition “in” and “at”, this study found errors in numerous other prepositions, such as preposition “on”, “for”, and “with”. The study reported errors in preposition “on” 139(20.32%) times, errors in preposition “for” 127(18.56) times and errors in preposition “with” 122(17.83%) times.

Based on findings, MS formation and omission errors are the two common error categories in preposition. Basically, there are four error types namely misformaton, addition, omission and misordering errors (Dulayetal, 1982). In the course of this study, misordering error is the only error type that did not occur in all prepositions except preposition “in”. Because most of the time prepositions are not used in a wrong order but rather they are misformed, added or omitted.

The findings discovered that preposition errors in writing are influenced by EFL learners’ first language. It won’t be wrong to say that Pashtu (EFL learners’ mother tongue) like every other language has different prepositions which are often mismatching with prepositions in English. The studies have also found that the function prepositions perform in English is hardly done in most learners’ first languages. And unfortunately, learners, due to grammar translation method (GTM) try to expect the same function as preposition do in their mother tongue which results errors in writing English.

Sudhakaran (2015) in his study discovered that misformation errors are the most frequently occurred error type in Malaysian pre-matriculation ESL learners. The findings of the study also revealed that the selected participants committed more errors in preposition

“in” than any other preposition, the main factor of which is learners’ mother tongue interference.

The proficiency level of preposition in learners was ranged from (61.1% to 71.6%). Sudhakaran’s findings are quite similar to the findings of this study, especially L1 interference in the use of preposition and learners’ range of errors in preposition “in”.

Based on data analysis, the study found that there are several types and characteristics of preposition errors occurred in students’ writing being influenced by overgeneralization, interlingual interference, lack of grammatical knowledge and inefficiency of applying grammatical rules (Richards & Sampson, 1994). Consequently, EFL teachers should know the major role of these factors in influencing prepositional errors made by EFL learners. It is true that while speaking English, the effect of first language cannot be avoided. As a result, while writing the learner often interchange the grammatical rules of English and Pashtu or any other native language. The current study also discovered that grammatical rules in English should not only be improved but modern EFL experts should also design course contents and teaching strategies that can enable learners to write error-free English. Moreover, this study can help English language learning, teaching and can provide appropriate feedback in writing.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study has been conducted to find out the major errors (misformation, addition, omission and misordering) in the use of preposition (in, at, on, for and with) and also highlight L1/mother tongue influence in error making. Based on findings, the study classified errors into four major types; misformation, addition and omission errors. The use of incorrect preposition, addition of the unnecessary preposition, the omission of preposition and the misordering error were found as the major errors in students’ writing. There were numerous factors responsible for prepositional errors but L1/mother tongue (Pashto) influence was the dominating factor that caused errors in their writing. The study also found the fact that errors in any foreign language are inevitable but they can be decreased with ample study and practice. It is also important to mention that this study cannot encompass a detailed description of all categories and types of prepositional errors but rather this is a limited attempt to analyze errors in students’ writing. Therefore, the researcher suggests other scholars to conduct a study in a wider range and population, and take interviews, or tests to collect data and do a scholarly analysis of the data for better findings and results.



6. REFERENCES

- Al-khresheh, M. (2015). A Review Study of Interlanguage Theory. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 4(3), 124 - 131.
- Bilal, H. A., Tariq, A. R., Yaqub, S., & Kanwal, S. (2013). Contrastive analysis of prepositional errors. *Academic Research International*, 4(5), 562.
- Brown, H. Douglas. 2000. *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Pearson Education Company.
- Corder. S. P. (1981) *Error Analysis and Inter-language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Crystal, D. (2003). *Dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* John Wiley & Sons., 30.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Dulay, H. C., Burt, M. K., & Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Language two*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dulay, H., Burt, M., & Krashen, S. (1982). *Language 2*, New York, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Oxford university press.
- Fisiak, J. (1981). *Contrastive Linguistic and the Language Teacher*. Oxford: Oxford Pergamon Press
- James, C. (2001). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Khansir, A. A. (2012). Error Analysis and Second Language Acquisition. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(5), 1027-1032.
- Lorincz, K. & Rebekah G. (2012). Difficulties in Learning Prepositions and Possible Solutions. *Linguistic Portofolios: Vol. 1, Article 14*.
- Nation, I. S. P., and Newton J. (2001). *Teaching EFL listening and speaking*. New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group.
- Sarfraz, S. (2011). Error analysis of the written English essays of Pakistani undergraduate students: A case study. *Asian Transactions on Basic & Applied Sciences*, 1(3), 2925.
- Sudhakaran, B. (2015). Acquisition of English preposition among Malaysian Learners: A case study. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 5 (3), 1-10.
- Yang, W. (2010). A Tentative Analysis of Errors in Language Learning and Use. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(3), 266-268.

