

Evaluating Iraqi EFL College Students' Performance in Using English Prepositions

**Instructor Nizar Hussein Waly nizarwali@yahoo.com
College of Basic Education/ Diyala University
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Abstract :

Prepositions are words in language used for compressing meaning into few words. The correct use of preposition constitutes a problematic area in language practice for Iraqi EFL students even advanced ones (Nasir 2001:1).The significance of mastering the use of prepositions requires paying closer attention on the part of teachers of English to this learning area. The problem of mastering English prepositions has three dimensions :form, meaning and use. One of the problems which contributes to misuse of prepositions is that foreign students confuse their meaning by using one preposition instead of another(Fitikdes,2002:83).The significance of study stems from the significance of English prepositions as well as errors analysis study. This study aims at evaluating college students' performance in using prepositions. Since the hypothesis is the basis of a research study, it is hypothesized that most Iraqi EFL college students encounter difficulties in using English prepositions .

This study is limited to the evaluation of fourth year students' performance (morning studies)in using English prepositions (place and time)at the college of Basic Education/Diyala University during the academic year (2012-2013) , and since the population of the study is limited, they are all considered as a sample of the current study. A test of 20 items is constructed to achieve the aim of the study ; ten items are designed to evaluate college students' performance in using prepositions of place , and ten items are designed to evaluate college students' performance in using prepositions of time. The test is duly validated by experts to be used for collecting data. The results of the study reveals that the misusing prepositions constitute a serious learning problem . Thus the results reveal that Iraqi EFL college students are not aware of using prepositions correctly due to the lack understanding the relationship of an object to its environment, or its place in a proper phrase. Thus , basic preposition use begs an understanding of what these relationships are.This may be the reason behind the inability of answering correctly. In the light of the results of the study, the researcher has presents a number of suggestions and recommendations.

تقويم أداء طلبة الجامعة العراقيين في استخدام حروف الجر في اللغة الانكليزية

م. نزار حسين ولي
كلية التربية الاساسية / جامعة ديالى

المستخلص :

حروف الجر هي كلمات في اللغة تستخدم لضغط المعنى في كلمات قليلة. ويشكل الاستخدام الصحيح للحرف الجر إشكالية في الممارسة اللغوية لطلبة الجامعة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية حتى في المراحل المتقدمة

(ناصر، ٢٠٠١: ١)، وتأتي أهميتها من خلال اتقان استخدام حروف الجر من قبل مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية عن طريق المزيد من الاهتمام بهذا الجانب. تتبلور مشكلة اتقان حروف الجر في اللغة الانكليزية في ثلاثة أبعاد: الشكل، والمعنى والاستخدام. أن واحدة من المشاكل التي تساهم في سوء استخدام حروف الجر لدى الطلبة الدراسيين لغة انكليزية لغة أجنبية هي الخلط في المعنى من خلال استخدام حرف جر آخر (فتيكدز، ٨٣: ٢٠٠٢)، وتأتي أهمية الدراسة من أهمية حروف الجر الانكليزية بالإضافة الى دراسة تحليل الأخطاء.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم أداء طلاب الجامعات في استخدام حروف الجر. وبما أن الفرضية هي أساس الدراسة البحثية، فقد افترض بأن معظم طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسيين اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية يواجهون صعوبات في استخدام حروف الجر في اللغة الإنجليزية.

تقتصر هذه الدراسة على تقييم طلبة السنة الرابعة (الدراسات الصباحية) في استخدام حروف الجر في اللغة الانكليزية (المكان والزمان) في كلية التربية الأساسية جامعة / ديالى الأساسية خلال العام الدراسي (٢٠١٢-٢٠١٣)، بما أن مجتمع الدراسة محدود، فقد أعتبر مجتمع الدراسة هو نفسه عينة الدراسة الحالية. صمم اختبار متكون من ٢٠ فقرة لتحقيق هدف الدراسة؛ صمم ١٠ فقرات لتقييم أداء الطلبة في استخدام حروف الجر للمكان، و ١٠ فقرات لتقييم أداء الطلبة في استخدام حروف الجر للزمان. قدم الاختبار للخبراء للتحقق من دقة الاختبار ومصداقيته كأداة لجمع البيانات. وظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن سوء استخدام حروف الجر يمثل مشكلة خطيرة في التعلم. وبالتالي فإن النتائج كشفت عن أن طلبة الجامعة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية غير مدركين لأستخدام حروف الجر بشكل صحيح بسبب عدم فهم العلاقة بين المجرور وبيئته، أو مكانه في العبارة المناسبة. وهكذا، يطرح لفهم الاستخدام الأساسي هو من خلال فهم ما هي هذه العلاقات، قد يكون هذه الأسباب هي وراء عدم قدرة الطلبة على الإجابة بشكل صحيح. في ضوء نتائج الدراسة، قدم الباحث بعض الاقتراحات والتوصيات.

Introduction

Prepositions are words in language used for compressing meaning into few words. Language is made richer and more flexible by their doing several meanings to

each of many prepositions in different situations and structures. Prepositions are considered one of the important parts of speech in English. They link a noun, pronoun or phrase to another part of a sentence. They are found in most languages and used as function words ,it is rare to construct a sentence without one. It can help not only where something took place but how and when.

The correct use of prepositions constitute a problematic linguistic area for Iraqi EFL learners, even advanced ones(Nasir,2001:1).The significance of mastering the use of prepositions requires from teachers of English to pay closer attention to this learning area. Thus, mastering the use of prepositions is of vital significance. Teachers of English need to know the degree and state of difficulties that face foreign learners of English in learning English prepositions. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the use of English prepositions by college students .

Section One

1.1 The Statement of the Problem and Its' Significance

A preposition relates the noun or pronoun following it to another word in the sentence. Since prepositions have different meanings, therefore, using a particular preposition affects the way other words in a sentence relate to one another. A preposition is never used by itself in a sentence , it is always a part of prepositional phrase. Fitikides (2002:83) states that one of the problems of misuse of prepositions is that foreign students confuse their meaning by using one preposition instead of another.

One major error observed in the students' writing and everyday speech is prepositional error. The notion of

correctness as far as prepositional use is concerned depends on linguistic competence and performance of the learner or speaker. Analysis of these errors especially in second language learning/teaching situations is more or less a learning device. This explains why Yankson (2000:87) stresses that error in language learning are significant. This indicates the real need of teachers to study the learners' errors in this area. Corder (1983:161) believes that errors analysis can be useful to foreign language teachers in three ways :first, it is important to the teacher as it tells him/her about the progress of the learner; second it provides evidence of how language is earned. Third, making errors can be used as a device by the learners so as to see how far the learner is from the optimum structures or whether he is ineligible or not. The difficulty of using English prepositions has three dimensions (form, meaning and use). English uses more prepositions than most other European languages (Alexander,1988:145). This may cause problems of choice because of the following:-

- a) Many English prepositions have nearly the same meaning, e.g. (beside , by , near, etc.).
- b) A single preposition in the students' mother tongue may do the work of several English prepositions.
- c) Some prepositions perform different functions, e.g. they may express time and place (at six o'clock,) and (at the bank) .

The correct use of prepositions is one of the most serious problems faced by learners of English especially those learning it as a foreign language as in the case with Iraqi students. It has repeatedly been asserted that English prepositions constitute a special problem. Foreign learners of

English face a great difficulty in learning English prepositions, this difficulty is represented by the fact that learners fail to decide which preposition should follow a certain noun, verb or adjective. The significance of studying learners' errors makes immediate contribution to the task of language teaching. Thus, the importance of this study may stem from the significance of English prepositions as well as recognizing the importance of error analysis in English prepositions as a foreign language.

1.2 Aims

The present study aims at evaluating college students' performance in using English prepositions.

1.3 Limits

This study is limited the evaluation of fourth year students (morning studies) in using English prepositions (place and time) at the college of Basic Education/Diyala university during the academic year (2012-2013).

SECTION TWO

Theoretical background and previous studies

2.1 English Prepositions

Prepositions are a closed set of items which precede noun phrases (or single nouns or pronouns) and certain forms of the verb to form a single constitute of structure(Crystal, 1985:243).Some words can be used either as prepositions or as adverbs. When a word is used as a preposition, it begins with a prepositional phrase and is followed by the object of

the preposition. If the word has no object, it will generally be used as an adverb.

Preposition : I found the wallet *behind* my bed.

Adverb: A group of children lagged *behind*.

2.2 Preposition and Prepositional Phrase

Most of the common prepositions consist of only one word (in, on, at, etc.). They are called simple prepositions, while, complex prepositions containing more than one word such as (in case of ,instead of, and a part of) . One-syllable prepositions are normally unstressed in speech e.g.; *There's someone at the door* .(No stress on AT). Prepositions of two or more syllables are normally stressed on one of the syllables ,e.g. ; *Opposite the bank; behind the wall*, etc.(stressed)

A prepositional phrase consists of a preposition followed by prepositional complement, which is characteristically a noun phrase or a clause or V-ing clause. The phrase that follows a preposition is called its complement and both the preposition and its complement is called (prepositional phrase). Prepositions usually express certain relations between two parts of a sentence. A prepositional phrase is simply a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun. The noun or pronoun is called the object of the preposition.

2.3 Teaching English Prepositions

Being an important aspect of grammar, it is known that prepositions are a problem to teach and it is difficult for ESL and EFL students to remember their appropriate usage (Andrew ,2003:50). Teachers are advised to use activities for

prepositions that keep students active and interested. In such activities, three rules are suggested:-

- a. keep it simple (use as little English as possible).
- b. use land marks and visual aids.
- c. use gestures, point if all else fails .

Teachers are advised to draw their students' attention to combinations (e.g. verb+ preposition , adjective+ preposition etc.) because as it is mentioned earlier that prepositions cannot be learnt alone.

2.4 Previous Studies

One of the previous studies that relates to the present study is entitled (assessment of errors made by university students in the use of prepositions of place and time) ,unpublished Ph.D dissertation ,Baghdad University,2001 by Abdul –Hameed, M.Nasir. This study deals with the analysis of the Iraqi Arabic speaking college students' errors in the use of English prepositions of place and time. The study aims at assessing the ability of EFL undergraduate learners in recognizing and producing prepositions, and identifying areas of potential difficulty and suggesting certain pedagogical activities to surround the difficulties.

The main concern of the current study is evaluating the difficulties and the errors committed by college students in using English prepositions , in order to specify efficient classroom procedures for teaching English prepositions of place and time and offer suggestions for conducting effective remedial work in this area.

Section Three

Procedures and Methodology

3.1 Population and Sample

The population of this study is limited to the fourth-year student at English Department (morning studies) / college of Basic Education/Diyala university during the academic year 2012-2013. Since the population of the study is limited, they are all considered as a sample of current study. The sample is consists of (50) Male and female students.

3.2 The Instrument

One of the basic requirements of the study is to construct a test. A test has been prepared by the researcher containing (25) multiple choice test of (25) items concerning prepositions of time and place which are commonly used and which may constitute a problem to learners (see appendix 1) .The test has been prepared on related literature putting into consideration the level of the students and the content of the test. The first version of the questionnaire is presented to a jury members ; specialists in linguistics and English Language Teaching and they are kindly requested to add ,omit and modify the items to be suitable to get the aim of the study and testifies its hypothesis. The following is a list of jury members as shown below:

1. Prof. Khalil I. Rijia (Ph.D.) /College of Education/Diyala University.
2. Asst. Prof. Muslim M jasim (MA)/ College of Basic Education/Diyala University.
3. Asst. Prof. Izaat S. Najim (MA)/College of Basic Education/Diyala University.

4. Asst. Prof. Amthel M Abbas (Ph.D)/College of Education/Diyala university
5. Inst. Inaam Y. Abdul-khaliq (Ph.D) /College of Basic Education/Diyala university.

3.3 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument.

Corder (1983 :356) defines validity as “the extent to which it does what it is intended to do .To achieve validity of the test, the researcher exposed it to the jury members. The suggestions and modifications of the jury members were considered in the refined form of the test.

To achieve the reliability of the test it is presented to a group of students from the same stage to check the degree of difficulty and practicality of the test and time allotted. This group is excluded from the total number of the sample. Some items were modified according to the findings of the pilot administration of the test.

3.4 The Final Administration of the Instrument

According to the suggestions and modifications of the jury members ,some of the items were modified and (5) items were omitted .Thus, the final version of the test consists of (20) items to achieve the aim and testify its hypothesis ; (10) items which evaluates college students' performance in using prepositions of place , and (10) items which evaluate college students' performance in using prepositions of time. of (20) items (see appendix 2).The researcher applied the test to the sample. The test was given under the same conditions . The students were instructed how to answer questions. All the test items consist of multiple choice items , thus, each items is followed by a list of four options. Students should choose the

single best option that fits the item. One mark is given for the correct answer. Since, the test consists of twenty items ,so the whole test will be scored out of (20).

Section Four

The Results, Conclusions and Suggestions

4.1 The Results of the Study

To fulfill the aim of the study , the percentage is used as a statistical mean .Thus, a value that is above 50% indicates that the item of certain preposition is achieved by students. See Table 1.

Table (1)
Scores and Percentile of English Preposition Test

Type of Preposition		Scores out of (20)	Percentage out of 100%
Place	In front of	20	100%
	Between	18	90%
	Among	17	85%
	By	17	85%
	Behind	14	70%
	In	9	45%
	On	9	45%
	Onto	8	40%
	At	7	35%
	Over	6	30%
Time	Before	18	90%
	During	17	85%
	Since	16	80%
	Until	15	75%
	Between	14	70%

	On	9	45%
	For	9	45%
	In	8	40%
	While	8	40%
	At	6	30%

4.2 Conclusions

- 1- The prepositions that are answered correctly by most of the students are the following:-
 - a. Prepositions of Place : (by , between , among , in front of , behind).
 - b. Prepositions of Time : (between , until , since , before , during).
- 2- The prepositions that are misused by most of the students are the following:-
 - a. Prepositions of Place : (at , onto , in , on , over).
 - b. Prepositions of Time : (at , in , on , while, for) .
- 3- The other prepositions of (place and time) were answered correctly by some of the students and misused by others as:- (since,for,after and between etc.)

4.3 Results

The results reveal that EFL college students are not aware of using prepositions correctly due to the lack of understanding the relationship of an object to its environment, or its place in a proper phrase. Thus , basic preposition use begs an understanding of what these relationships are, may be the reasons behind the inability of answering correctly. The limitations of the study show that prepositions constitute a serious learning problem

for the sample reason subjects. It can also be concluded that instructional program of English Department is not efficient enough.

4.4 Analysis of Results

The analysis of the results of the study are as follows:-

1. prepositions of frequency used are easily mastered, then those which are not frequently used.
2. Certain prepositions constitute greater difficulty than some other prepositions. This difference may be for longer time. Thus ,they are familiar to most of the learners

4-5 Suggestions

The following suggestions are drawn:-

1. It is suggested to find patterns that can focus and simplify their efforts at overcoming English prepositions errors.
2. It is not sufficient merely to teach lexical combinations, including all kinds of prepositions in isolation. Rather, it should be taught in context.
3. Specify efficient classroom procedures for teaching English prepositions of place and time, and offer suggestion conducting an effective remedial work in this area.

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Appendix 1
A Questionnaire Submitted to the Jury Members
(First Version)

Dear Mr./Mrs.

The researcher intends to conduct a study entitled "Evaluating the college students, performance in using English prepositions". The aim of this study is evaluating the students, performance by identifying their errors in using some of the common prepositions of place and time. The study is limited to the fourth stage (morning studies)/college of Basic Education/Diyala university during the academic year (2009-2010).

As specialists in the field of teaching English, please check these items and kindly state if they are suitable or not to test prepositions of place and time .Any addition or modification will be highly regarded.

Thank you
Inst. Nizar Hussein

Q/1-Write the number of the item and the letter of the correct choice:

1-Look at the boy swimming ----- the river.

a-at b-on c-onto d-in

2-Jacks' house is the white one----- the end of the street.

a-into b-in c-at d-on

3-Don't 'sit----- the chair. It is broken.

a-on b-in c-at d-into

4-Suha sat ----- layla and Nora.

a-among b-in c-between d-onto

5-It is difficult to recognize him. He is sitting ----- thirty students.

a-between b-on c-among d-onto

6-They fell ----- the well .

a-on b-at c-onto d-into

7-The children ran ----- the hills.

a-in b-into c-over d-under

8-When he heard the bad news, he broke ----- completely.

a-away b-down c-in d-out

9-The hotel is ----- the stream.

a-under b-behind c-out of d-at

10-He criticized every body and even ran ----- his few friends.

a-up b-over c-down d-into

11-The car was parked----- the house.

a-over b-into c-under d-in front of

12-The school is not far from here .It is situated ----- the garage.

a-across b-over c-up d-by

13-Susan likes travelling ----- summer.

a-on b-at c-in d-for

14-The hotel is -----the stream

a-under b-behind c-out of d- among

15-Can you possibly make -----what he has written here?

a-for b-up c-in d-for

16-They got married----- the twelfth of march.

a-at b-on c-during d-in

17-I don't like going out ----- night.

a-at b-in c-during d-in

18-We watched television ----- two hours last night.

a-during b-while c-since d-for

19-We met a lot of people -----our holiday.

a-for b-while c-during d-at

20-Robert suddenly felt ill ----- he was doing the examination.

a-during b-at c-in d-while

21-I was reading ----- nine and twelve o'clock.

a-between b-in c-during d-for

22-let us wait ----- it stops raining.

a-while b-between c-until d-since

23-I haven't seen him -----last Christmas.

a-between b-since c-for d-during

24-They arrived just----- we left.

a-before b-during c-until d-in

25-Marry went ----- the hill.

a-on b-out of c-down d-over

Appendix 2

The Final Version of the Test

Q/Write the number of the item and the letter of the correct choice.

1- Look at the boy swimming ----- the river.

a-at b-on c-onto d-in

2-Jack's house is the white one----- the end of the street.

a-into b-in c-at d-on

3-Don't sit----- the chair. It is broken.

a-on b-in c-at d-into

4-Suha sat ----- layla and Nora.

a-among b-in c-between d-onto

5-It is difficult to recognize him. He sitting ----- thirty students.

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6-They fell ----- the well .

a-on b-at c-onto d-into

7-The children ran ----- the hills.

a-in b-into c-over d-under

8-The hotel is ----- the stream.

a-under b –behind c-out of d-among

9-The car was parked----- the house.

a-over b-into c-under d-in front of

10-The school is not far from here .It is situated ----- the garage.

a-across b-over c-up d-by

11-Susan likes travelling ----- summer.

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