

Error Analysis and English Prepositions Learning Strategy of Sudanese EFL Learners

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Abstract: *This study aimed to investigate the learning strategy of English preposition proficiency of Sudanese EFL Learners. The participants of the study were 50 intermediate year students chosen randomly from the School of Management Studies, Khartoum University. The participants enrolled in a pre- intermediate general English language course for two semesters. Written and oral samples were taken at the end of the first and second semesters, respectively. Errors were grouped into three types: omission, addition and substitution. Errors were analyzed in terms of performance mistakes, negative transfer, and overgeneralization. The main findings of the study indicated significant differences in the strategy of learning English prepositions between the first and second semesters. The study showed that the students were progressing well in their learning of English prepositions. It also, revealed that female students achieved better learning strategies in learning English prepositions compared to male students in both written and oral productions in the two semesters.*

KEYWORDS: error analysis, learning strategy, English prepositions

INTRODUCTION

It is noticed that most students in intermediate year at the school of management studies fail to produce three or four sentences or utterances without committing several preposition errors. The study tries to discover whether the students employ similar or different learning strategies of English prepositions in written and oral productions at the end of the first and second semesters. To achieve this goal, the types and frequency of preposition errors in written and oral productions at the end of the two semesters are compared and contrasted to examine areas that show development and areas that do not. Thus, this study attempts empirically and objectively to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do students demonstrate similar or different performance in learning English prepositions in written and oral productions at the end of the first and second semesters?
- 2) What patterns and frequency of errors can be observed at the end of the first and second semesters?
- 3) Do students achieve similar or different learning strategies at the end of the first and second semesters?

- 4) Are there any gender differences in the students' overall performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the definition of error analysis, definition of prepositions, classification of errors, sources of errors and some previous studies on error analysis. Sharmma (1981:21) defined error analysis as “a process based on the analysis of learners’ errors with one clear objective : evolving suitable and effective teaching- learning strategy and remedial measures necessary in certain clearly marked out areas of the foreign language” According to Attia (1990: 12) “Error analysis is the study of learners reoccurring mistakes, their classification into categories, using them as basis for preparing lessons and materials designed to help learners overcome such mistakes.” Brown (2007) defined an error as an “identifiable alteration of the grammatical elements of a native speaker,” Also, Corder (1974) defined error “a systematic deviation from a selected norm or set of norms “ Kofi (2010), argued that, English has 60 to 70 prepositions, a higher number than most other languages. Huddelston (1984) stated that, prepositions are subtlest and a set of small words that are a closed class in English Language Diab,N (1996) stated that prepositions show a significant difficulty for Arab English learners because different prepositions in English serve the same purpose. The following sentences, for instance, use the prepositions "in," "at," and "on" to denote location in slightly different ways. “*He is in the garden*”, “*He is at home*”, or *He is residing on a college campus*. When students are unsure of which prepositions to use in a sentence, they usually compare it to its Arabic equivalent and translate the Arabic preposition literally into English. Lengo (1995) classified errors into three main categories: omission errors, addition errors, and substitution errors. Omission error means linguistic forms are omitted by the learner while learning a foreign language. Addition error means some unnecessary or incorrect linguistic forms are added by the learners while learning a foreign language. Substitution errors occur when a learner selects an incorrect linguistic element while learning a foreign language. Also, Lengo (1995) classified errors as productive and receptive errors. Productive errors are those which occur in language learner utterances, and receptive errors are those resulting in a listener’s misunderstanding of speaker’s intentions.

The sources of errors can be classified into: performance errors, competence errors, approximation errors, overgeneralization errors, and incomplete learning errors. Performance errors are mistakes like slips of the tongue, omissions spelling mistakes, unnecessary repetition, and so on. The learner makes these errors not because he/she does not know the language, but because he /she is in a hurry, he/she is writing or speaking under stress, or is forgetful or simply careless. Competence errors on the hand reflected the limit of the learner’s competence in using the target language. These are serious errors that show the areas which the learner has not yet mastered in his/ her L2. Approximation errors are usually called mother tongue interference. Here the L2 learner produces forms that are either identical to approximation of features of his mother tongue. Overgeneralization errors refer to the process by which the learner masters one form in the target language and extends its application to a context where it is inapplicable. Incomplete learning errors refer to those errors which occur because the L2 speaker has only

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half learned structure a structure, a word, an expression or other feature of the target language and is therefore liable to produce structures or idioms are only partially correct.

Foo, (2007) conducted a study on how Chinese ESL learners used various prepositional forms. He looked into how Chinese ESL students used place, direction, and time prepositions. The analysis' findings showed that the preposition of time is the most problematic kind of preposition. Lakkis, et al (2000) examined the errors of prepositions that occur as a result of negative transfer of Arab learners of English. They concluded that some English prepositions have equivalents in Arabic and others do not. The areas which have no equivalents usually create problems for Arab learners of English. Gomez (2010) studied the use of prepositions by involving Upper Intermediate English course students from an ELT program. The study included 54 writing compositions composed by 20 students from different courses at three different times and days. The study revealed that 13 prepositions were the most erroneous. In his study, Islami (2015) discussed the usage of prepositions in English and studied the sources of errors and difficulties of ELL learners. Likewise, the study examined the misuse of prepositions committed by the first grade of Economic students at the AAB private college in Kosovo. The study revealed that the most erroneous preposition is the preposition of time (in, on and at) due to the interference of the mother tongue. Nginios (2013) examined how French-speaking learners learned about Spanish prepositions. He concluded the students' lack of understanding of how prepositions should be used, that made the learning of prepositions difficult.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study were 50 intermediate year students chosen randomly from the School of Management Studies, Khartoum University. The participants enrolled in a pre-intermediate general English language course for two semesters. Of the 50 students 27 were females and 23 were males. All the participants' native language is Arabic and they learned English for 8 years. 4 years in basic schools, 3 years in secondary schools and one year as university requirement in the preliminary year at the university. Oral and written tests were used to collect the data for this study at the end of the first and second semesters, respectively. Preposition errors were classified and tabulated. For frequent types of errors, total use of the structure in which the error occurs was counted. Also, omission, substitution and redundancy errors were counted. The number of prepositions correct use was counted in order to find the degree of overall improvement between the two semesters. Written and oral productions of prepositions errors were compared to see if different errors were being made. Scores in oral and written productions obtained by males and females students were compared to see which gender made progress over the other. T-Test was used to see if there was significant difference in the average performance of the students in both written and oral productions. Also, it was used to compare and contrast between the average performance of the male and female students in written and oral productions in the two semesters. Correlation was obtained to measure the degree of correlation of performance in the first and second semesters for male and female

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students in oral and written production. Also, the Coefficient of Variation was computed to the relative variation of students' performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Types of Exam Type of Errors	WP 1		WP2		OP1		OP2	
	No. of errors		No. of errors	%	No. of errors	%	No. of errors	%
Omission	24	4.7	15	2.1	21	3.7	10	2.2
Substitution	97	18.7	80	11.4	109	19.7	49	10.8
Redundancy	25	4.8	14	2.0	27	4.8	12	2.6
Total Errors	146	28.2	109	15.5	157	28.2	71	15.6
Correct used	370		590		397		382	
Total Used	516		699		554		453	

Table (4.1) The Distribution of Preposition Errors per total use Found in Written and

Oral Production at the End of First and Second Semesters

It can be seen from Table (4.1) above that the number of errors in written and oral production are almost equal during semester one (28.2% compared to 28.2%) and in semester two (15.5% compared to 15.6%). It is worth mentioning that both writing and speaking errors decreased in semester two by almost one-third. For example writing errors dropped from 28.2% to 15.5% in semester two, while speaking errors dropped from 28.2 to 15.6. In both written and oral productions, substitution errors dropped sharply from 18.7% to 11.4 in writing and from 19.7% to 10.8% in speaking. The number of omission errors decreased by almost halve in both written and oral productions.(4.7% compared to 2.1%) in writing and (3.7% compared to 2.2) in speaking. However; the number of redundancy errors decreased sharply from 4.8% to 2.0% in written production and from 4.8% to 2.6% in oral production.

Preposition omission Errors

The preposition omission errors are considered a minor problem in this study. As seen in table (4.1) the percentage of preposition omission errors in writing was 4.7% at the end of the first semester and 2.1% at the end of the second semester, with a decrease of 2.6%. However; the percentage of preposition errors in speech was 3.7% at semester one and 2.2% at semester two, with a decrease of 1.5%. The preposition most missed out in this study is (**to**) as exemplified below.

The preposition (to) be omitted when it is expressing a purpose. Examples:

Erroneous :(*my friend camevisit us)

Correct English: (my friend came to visit us)

Literal translation (sadigi jaa yazurna)

This type of error arises from the interference of the mother tongue, because in Sudanese colloquial Arabic these verbs do not require the preposition (jaa yazurna) is literally translated into English structure (came visit us).

It also observed that the preposition (to) with the verb (prefer) is dropped where it is needed as in the following example:

Erroneous :(*I prefer ...live in city)

Correct English: (I prefer to live in city)

Literal translation (afdil aish fi almadina)

Again, this type of error is attributed to the negative transfer of the mother tongue because in Arabic such construction does not require a preposition. For example (afdil aish fi almadina) which is literally translated into English structure (*I prefer live in city).

Substitution Errors

The use of the wrong preposition or preposition substitutions is considered a major problem in this study. As seen in table (4.1) preposition substitution errors amounted to 18.7% at the end of the first semester and dropped to 11.4% at the end of the second semester in writing. However, they were 19.7% at the end of the first semester and dropped to 10.8% at the end of the second semester in speech. Substitution errors occur when (**in**) is used instead of (**at**), (**on**), or (**of**) as seen in the following examples:

Erroneous (* **In** night clouds became very dark)

Correct English (**At** night clouds became very dark)

Literal translation (fi alayel alsihab biga aswad)

In Arabic, the English preposition (at) can be translated by (fi) which is literally equivalent to the English preposition (in) for example (fi alayel). Thus, the students used the preposition (in) instead of (at) using their mother tongue.

Erroneous (* we were listing to the news **in** TV)

Correct English (we were listing to the news **on** TV)

Literal translation(kona nsmaa alakhbar fi altelfzyun)

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Again, this is a case of interference of the mother tongue. In Arabic, the English preposition (on) can be translated into (ala) which is literally equivalent to English preposition (in). Thus, a false analogue occurred.

Erroneous (* there is a shortage in good schools)

Correct English (there is a shortage **of** good schools)

Literal translation(hunak nags fi almadaris aljayda)

Also, this is a case of interference of the mother tongue. The English preposition (of) could be translated into Arabic preposition (fi). For example (nags fi almadaris). The Arabic preposition (fi) is literally equivalent to the English preposition (in) was used instead of the preposition (of)

Redundancy Errors

It is noticed that some of the subjects of this study used a preposition where it is not needed. It can be seen from Table (4.1) above that the number of prepositions used redundantly dropped from 4.8% to 2.0% at the end of the second semester in writing and dropped from 4.8% to 2.6% at the end of the second semester in speech. For example:

Erroneous (* the weather encouraged me to enjoy with rain)

Correct English (the weather encouraged me to enjoy rain)

Literal translation (aljau shajani atmata bilmatar)

In Arabic, such a structure requires a preposition. For example the verb (enjoy) in Arabic (yatamata) is always followed by a preposition, while such a verb in English does not require a preposition. Thus, the students assume that a preposition is required in this context.

Erroneous (* on last Sunday the rain poured heavily)

Correct English (last Sunday the rain poured heavily)

Literal translation (fi youm alahad almadi alamtar hatalat bighzarah)

The error in the above example seems to arise from the interference of the mother tongue because in Arabic such structure requires the preposition. For example (fi youm alahad almadi) which is literally translated into English (on last Sunday).

Total number of errors

As seen in table (4.1) in the written samples, errors decreased from 28.2% to 15.5%. In comparison to errors in oral samples, percentage of total errors in oral production also decreased

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from 28.2 % at semester one to 15.6% at semester two. This indicates that the students are progressing well in their learning of English prepositions.

4.5 Students' performance

Type of exam	semester	No. of cases	Average	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation	T-value	Correlation	P-value
Written production	First	50	10.74	2.11	0.20	36.036	.90**	.000
	Second	50	13.40	2.29	0.17	41.454		.000
Oral production	First	50	10.48	1.88	0.21	39.498	.71**	.000
	Second	50	12.60	2.65	0.18	33.626		.000

Table (4.2) Results of students in written and oral production at end of the first and second semesters.

Table (4.2) above shows the students' performance in written and oral productions at the end of the first and second semesters. It is clear that the students' performance has improved significantly in the second semester in both written and oral productions. In the written production the average of performance increased from 10.74 to 13.10, and in the oral production the average of performance increased to 10.48 in the first semester and to 12.60 in the second semester. The coefficient of variation for written production declined from 0.20 to 0.17 and from 0.21 to 0.18 in oral production indicating tremendous improvement both in average and variability. The T value for written production in the first and second semesters is 36.3 and 41.45 respectively, with P value of 0.00 and for the oral production T value is 39.49 in semester one and 33.62 in semester two with P value of 0.00. Both P values in written and oral productions are less than the level of significant 5% indicating that the difference in average performance is significant in both written and oral productions. The correlation between the first and the second semester in written production was very high amounting to 0.90% indicating a positive and high association in performance in the two semesters. Similarly, the correlation between the first and the second semesters in oral production was a bit higher amounting to .071%.

Type of exam	Semester	Sex	No. of cases	Average	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of variation	T-value	P-value
Written production	First	male	23	10.13	2.242	0.22	21.667	.000
		female	27	11.26	1.873	0.17	31.240	.000
	Second	male	23	12.61	2.500	0.20	24.190	.000
		female	27	14.07	1.880	0.13	38.908	.000
Oral production	First	male	23	10.43	2.313	0.22	21.640	.000
		female	27	10.52	1.451	0.14	37.668	.000
	Second	male	23	11.57	2.555	0.22	21.706	.000
		female	27	13.48	2.440	0.18	28.715	.000

Table (4.3) Results of students in written and oral productions at end of the first and second semesters according to sex

Table (4.3) above shows the male and female results in written and oral production at the end of the first and second semesters. As it can be seen in table (4.3) above, the male students' performance in written production in the first semester was 10.13 and 12.61 in the second semester. On the other hand, the female students' performance increased from an average of 11.26 in the first semester to 14.07 in the second semester. The T- value and P -value of the test indicated that the performance of the female students was better than the male students in written production in both the first and second semesters. The coefficient of variation for the female students in written production was smaller than that of the males in both the first and second semesters (0.17 compared to 0.22) and (0.13 compared to 0.20) indicating that less heterogeneity in performance with female students. The T- value and P- value tests indicated that there is a slight difference in performance between the male and female students in oral production in the first semester. The average performance in oral production in the first semester for female students was 10.52 compared to 10.43 for male students. In the second semester, the average performance of female students in the oral production was 13.48 compared to 11.57 for male students. It is clear that female students achieved constantly better compared to male students in both written and oral production in the first and second semesters.

CONCLUSION

The number of errors in written and oral production is almost equal during semester one (28.2% compared to 28.2%) and in semester two (15.5% compared to 15.6%). It is worth mentioning that both writing and speaking errors decreased in semester two by almost one-third. In the written sample, errors decreased from 28.2% to 15.5%. In comparison to errors in oral percentage of total errors in oral production also decreased from 28.2% at semester one to 15.6% at semester two. This indicates that the students are progressing well in their learning of English prepositions. Female students achieved constantly better compared to male students in both written and oral production in the first and second semesters.

Future Research

For further research attention should be directed to investigate the strategies of learning of frequency errors made by Sudanese in secondary schools. Comparison between students' receptive and productive competence will be another area of investigation.

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