

## Writing Difficulties in Prepositions of Place Encountered by Albaha University Students' at Preparatory Year Program

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### Abstract:

*This study attempts to explore the writing difficulties in prepositions of place (at, in and on) encountered by Albaha university students' at preparatory year program. It also sheds light on the causes stand behind these difficulties. Fifty students at Albaha University enrolling in the preparatory year program were chosen randomly. They were given a twelve-sentence gap-filling test. Each sentence in the test includes a preposition in which students are likely to misuse. The students were asked to fill in the gaps with a suitable preposition. Also, the researcher employed a questionnaire as a tool of collecting data. The descriptive analytic method to investigate and handle this problem was adopted. The findings revealed the deficiency performance of the students in using the prepositions of place in the a proper way. The teachers attributed this failure to the interference of the mother tongue and the carelessness of the students.*

**Key words:** writing difficulties, prepositions of place, university students, preparatory year program (PYP).

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching English writing as general in the Arab world is challenging. Many students are able to understand the

language, but most of the students face difficulties in communicating their ideas effectively through writing prepositions. The problem is the lack of both: the adequate stock of prepositions usage and creativity in writing. Still, it is a very tough mission for teachers to teach English writing effectively so that students could become independent learners and benefit a lot from the innovative teaching techniques adopted by the teachers.

Prepositions are always considered as the most crucial elements in teaching English particularly in the teaching of speaking and writing skills (Mukundan & Norwati,2009).

A preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being represented by the prepositional complement of the various types of relational meaning (Quirk et al, 1985). These relationships include those of time, place, direction, and various degrees of mental and emotional states. Studies have shown that the preposition is one of the most problematic categories that students encounter in learning English (Ravina, 1982).

However, prepositions are existed in both Arabic and English language, and the Arabic learners of English sometimes use the literally translation to Arabic or English to understand and apply the prepositions which may result in making syntactic and semantic errors.

(Thahir, 1987) claims that prepositions can cause a problem for Arabic learners of English. What makes it harder for Arab learners of English to master English preposition usage is that Arabic prepositions are more limited in number than those of English. (Abbas, 1961) says that there are only twenty prepositions in Arabic. On the other hand, (Hayden, 1956) claims that English has fifty seven prepositions.

Researchers on different languages with which English is in contact have attested to learners' difficulty in learning and using prepositions (Al-Marrani, 2009; Tahaimah, 2010; Bukhari et al., 2011; Jalali and Shojaei, 2012). (Grubic, 2004) concluded that speakers of English as a foreign language encounter three

problems with prepositions: using the incorrect preposition, or deleting the necessary preposition or using an additional preposition.

Some teachers do not pay much attention to these set of words especially in a second language setting (Delija et al., 2013), because English preposition is just as hard to teach as it is to learn! According to Boquist (2009:5) “one cannot really explain a preposition without using one or two more prepositions in the definition ... soon both the teacher and student are caught in a spiral whirlwind of prepositions and their still vague meaning”.

The errors which deal with prepositions are the most common mistakes done by the non-native speakers especially in their writing. This could be due to a wide range of linguistic functions that prepositions serve, hence ESL learners may feel discouraged to learn and master this grammar topic. For example, in choosing the appropriate preposition, one has to know and understand the context as well as “the intended meaning” (Tetreault & Chodorow, 2008).

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study tries to explore the difficulties encountered by the preparatory year program students' in writing prepositions of place and to unveil the reasons behind these difficulties. Accordingly, the study attempts to:

- a) investigate the writing difficulties in prepositions of place encountered by the preparatory year program students'.
- b) shed light on the reasons behind writing difficulties in prepositions of place.
- c) suggest different ways that students and teachers can employ to overcome these difficulties.
- d) propose effective teaching techniques and activities to help students overcome the writing difficulties in prepositions.

e) ask the students to avoid translating English prepositions into Arabic when using prepositions in sentences.

f) encourage the students to look up at the dictionaries to check the usage of prepositions in the sentences.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of the study will be of great value to the teachers of English to give prepositions much time, more attention and considerable time for exercises. Syllabus designers are to choose best ways to improve using prepositions through enriching syllabuses with prepositions activities.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Subjects**

The subjects of this study are fifty male students enrolling in preparatory year program at faculty of Sciences and Arts- Albaha University. The targeted sample are science students who are going to specialize next year in one of the following subjects: mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology and computer sciences. The students attend nineteen hours classes in English language per week. The students' age ranged from 18 to 19 and they have been learning English for nine years. The participants were chosen randomly. This study was run in November 2016.

### **Instruments**

In order to collect reliable and authentic data, the following instruments were employed in this study:

### **Students' Test**

Calkins (1980) argues that the best way to improve students' grammar is to teach the grammar subjects focusing on the

students own piece of writing. The test consists of 20 questions about the prepositions of place (*at*, *in* and *on*) likely to be misused due to the lack of knowledge and mother tongue interference. In addition, Ph.D holders working in English Language departments were asked their opinions on the content of the test as a piloting process. Grabe (2009) believes that gap-filling is a more beneficial question type in measuring the knowledge of some target structures such as prepositions. The questions in the test were designed in a way that the students could write a suitable preposition in the gaps. The purpose here was to make the students produce the answer on their own rather than seeing and remembering it in a choice. The design of the questions can be said to be appropriate to the purpose of the research.

### **Teachers' Questionnaire**

Oxford (1996) presents some advantages and limitations of questionnaires in general. Questionnaires can give general assessments of across a variety of tasks. They are effective, quick and easy to administer and don't threaten the respondents. Yet questionnaires don't describe the problem in details. Thus they should be supported by other data collection tools.

In order to learn more about writing difficulties with prepositions of place encountered by PYP students', and to gain an accurate understanding of these difficulties, it is critical that we have to learn from teachers about their own point of view. Teachers' perspectives are so important because they are close to their students' needs. Moreover, teachers' perspectives give a considerable reliability to the data collection.

### **DISCUSSION**

This paper mostly focuses on the causes and areas of difficulties that Saudi students at Albaha University have with prepositions of place.

According to (Mathews, 1997), prepositions are words or groups of words that typically come before a noun phrase and indicate syntactic relations. Agoi (2003) described prepositions as group of words used with a noun or noun equivalents to show the link between that noun which it governs and another word. Hamdallah and Tushyeh (1988) stated that prepositions are function words that link words, phrases, or clauses to other words in the sentence.

Prepositions as general have always been a challenge not only to ESL learners but also to ESL teachers. (Ellis, 1994) claims that only at higher levels, such as advanced or proficiency level, the transfer can take place. Transfer may be a developmental phenomenon in that it occurs only when the learner reaches a 'natural' stage of acquisition which bears a crucial similarity to some native structure.

### **Causes of difficulties with prepositions**

Lynch (2010) claims that, some basic features of English language grammar structure are illogical or dissimilar to speakers of other languages and do not readily lend themselves to being well understood, even in context. He sees prepositions as one of these features which offer exceptional challenge to EFL students because they may be radically different from the manner of expression in the student's first language.

Zughoul (1979) emphasized that Arab learners encountered special difficulties in learning English prepositions due to these critical reasons: (1) Traditional methods of teaching such as the grammar translation method which encourages students to translate in their minds, and (2) the interference from their native language, Arabic; and (3) the English preposition is not always expressed in Arabic by a preposition, its equivalent may be a different part of speech.

Al-Marrani (2009) ran a comparative study of prepositions in Arabic and English. The results show similarities and differences between the prepositions of Arabic

and English. The similarities between them facilitate the development process of learning English language (positive transfer or interference); whereas differences make learning process of English language difficult and as a result Arab learners make many mistakes (negative transfer or interference).

According to Scott and Tucker (1974), English prepositions rarely match to Arabic prepositions. They attributed about two thirds of the errors in prepositions to native- language Arabic and one third interference; misuse of prepositions had its source chiefly in Arabic. Substitution of prepositions stemmed from both Arabic and English forms. They concluded that Arab EFL learners learn the semantic meaning of the English lexical prepositions before they learn all the restrictions on their usage. After surveying most of the studies conducted on prepositional errors, which Arab EFL learners committed, Hashim (1996) found that a lot of errors the Arab EFL learners made were syntactic and due to the influence of the mother tongue.

### **The Prototype Theory**

The approach taken is subsumed within Lakoff's application of prototype theory to linguistics (as formulated most prominently by, for example, Rosch 1978). A key argument about prepositions is that each one is likely to have a relatively small number of related literal meanings, among which the tendency is for one to be psychologically 'prototypical'. An additional contention is that some of the literal meanings of a preposition, especially its prototypical meaning, are extended by metaphor to create another relatively small set of related meanings.

According to (Lindstromberg, 1991), "the proto type theory contends that the polysemous of prepositions can be explained through analysis of proto type meanings all non-proto typical meanings are thought to be related to the proto type often through metaphorical extension (P. 228)". looking again

at the prepositions on Lindstromberg (1996) explain that non-proto typical meanings like *come on* can be understood by extending the proto typical meanings. This means that teachers must first teach the proto typical meanings, often through the use of total physical reports (TPR) , and only then began to branch out to more abstract meanings. To extend the semantic mapping even further, comparison and contrast to other prepositions can be useful.

### Data analysis

After collecting the required data based on the tools mentioned earlier, the researcher conducted the analysis of data for the present study as follows:

### Students' Test

The students' test consists of twelve sentences based mainly on preposition of place (*at*, *in* and *on*) where the students are asked to write a suitable preposition in the gaps. In general, we use (*at*) for a point e.g. *at the end of the street*. We use (*in*) for an enclosed place e.g. *in the garden* and we use (*on*) for a surface e.g. *on the wall*.

**Table (1): The frequency distribution for the students' responses about the test.**

No	sentences	True	False	Total	Percent
1-	The shop is <b>at</b> the end of the street.	17 34%	33 66%	50	100%
2-	There was a "no smoking" sign <b>on</b> the wall.	22 44%	28 56%	50	100%
3-	When will you arrive <b>at</b> the office?	19 38%	31 62%	50	100%
4-	Do you work <b>in</b> an office?	28 56%	22 44%	50	100%
5-	There are no prices <b>on</b> this menu.	15 30%	35 70%	50	100%
6-	Do you live <b>in</b> Japan?	26 52%	24 48%	50	100%
7-	Jupiter is <b>in</b> the Solar System.	21 42%	29 58%	50	100%
8-	The author's name is <b>on</b> the cover of the book.	18 36%	32 64%	50	100%
9-	I have a meeting <b>in</b> New York.	23 46%	27 54%	50	100%
10-	You are standing <b>on</b> my foot.	13 26%	37 74%	50	100%



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11-	My plane stopped <b>at</b> Dubai.	14 28%	36 72%	50	100%
12-	I live <b>on</b> the 7 <sup>th</sup> floor.	16 32%	34 68%	50	100%

Table (2): Descriptive Statistics of the students' performance in the test.

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
item1	3	33.00	9.52774	16.50253	272.333
item2	3	28.00	8.51143	14.74223	217.333
item3	3	31.00	9.02466	15.63117	244.333
item4	3	28.00	8.51143	14.74223	217.333
item5	3	35.00	10.13794	17.55942	308.333
item6	3	26.00	8.35331	14.46836	209.333
item7	3	29.00	8.64741	14.97776	224.333
item8	3	32.00	9.26163	16.04161	257.333
item9	3	27.00	8.41295	14.57166	212.333
item10	3	37.00	10.83718	18.77054	352.333
item11	3	36.00	10.47749	18.14754	329.333
item12	3	34.00	9.82061	17.00980	289.333
Valid N (list wise)	3				

Table (1) and (2) show the scores of the students' gap-filling test. Obviously, the participants didn't get high grades in the test, which means that they were unfamiliar with prepositions usage. From the above tables, it appears that the most difficult preposition for the students in this study is *at*. The preposition *at* was employed in three sentences, and the mean of the correct usage of the preposition is 16.66% which is considered very poor comparing to the misuses of the preposition which is 33.33%. The highest score that the students achieved in the prepositions' usage, was in the preposition *in*. The preposition *in* was employed in four sentences, and the mean of the corrected usage is 23.50% comparing to 25.50% of the misuses of the preposition.

### Teachers' Questionnaire

After checking reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the researcher had distributed the questionnaire on determined study sample (30) teachers, and the researcher constructed the

required tables for collected data. This step consists transformation of the qualitative (nominal) variables (Strongly agree, Agree, Not sure, Disagree, Strongly disagree) to quantitative variables (5, 4, 3, 2 ,1) respectively, also the graphical representation have done for this purpose and the responses percentage.

The researcher aims at finding the answer of the teachers' perspectives on the difficulties that the PYP students encountered in prepositions of place.

To find the answer for this question, here are the teachers' perspectives:

**Table (3): The frequency distribution for the teachers' responses about the questionnaires.**

No.	Statement	Answer					Number
		5	4	3	2	1	
1-	Students face difficulties in using English prepositions.	6 20.6	17 56.7	3 10	2 6.7	2 6.7	30 100%
2-	The students attend enough English classrooms hours.	9 30.3	7 23.3	7 23.3	2 6.6	5 16.6	30 100%
3-	The allocated classrooms for writing are not enough.	17 56.7	11 36.7	1 3.3	1 3.3	0 0	30 100%
4-	There is no direct focus in the syllabus on writing prepositions.	8 26.7	6 20.0	3 10.0	6 20.0	7 23.3	30 100%
5-	Writing prepositions exercises are not enough.	12 40.0	7 23.3	3 10.0	3 10.0	5 16.7	30 100%
6-	Prepositions tests are ignored at university level.	12 40.0	10 33.3	6 20.0	2 6.7	0 0	30 100%
7-	The students do not care a lot about writing prepositions.	14 46.7	10 33.3	3 10.0	2 6.7	1 3.3	30 100%
8-	Prepositions errors are attributed to the interference of the mother tongue.	10 33.3	13 43.3	4 13.3	2 6.7	1 3.3	30 100%
9-	The students translate the prepositions into Arabic.	13 43.3	11 36.7	1 3.3	2 6.7	3 10.0	30 100%
10-	Students do not use the dictionaries to check the usage of prepositions.	11 36.7	9 30.0	4 13.3	3 10.0	3 10.0	30 100%
11-	English preposition is hard to teach as it is to learn.	17 56.7	8 26.0	1 3.3	2 6.7	2 6.7	30 100%
12-	Teachers need to become aware of teaching prepositions through appropriate teacher's training.	10 33.3	8 26.0	4 13.3	6 20.0	2 6.7	30 100%

**Table (4): Correlations of the Teachers' Responses**

	item1	item2	item3	item4	item5	item6	item7	item8	item9	item10	item11	item12
Pearson Correlation	1	.416	.588	.105	.378	.647	.613	.891*	.691	.661	.402	.547
Sig. (2-tailed)		.486	.297	.867	.530	.238	.271	.042	.196	.224	.502	.340
Pearson Correlation	.416	1	.732	.101	.732	.815	.762	.685	.679	.783	.700	.478
Sig. (2-tailed)	.486		.160	.872	.159	.093	.134	.202	.208	.117	.188	.415
Pearson Correlation	.588	.732	1	.544	.939*	.914*	.996**	.870	.973**	.991**	.973**	.914*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.297	.160		.343	.018	.030	.000	.055	.005	.001	.005	.030
Pearson Correlation	.105	.101	.544	1	.714	.157	.469	.229	.624	.464	.654	.423
Sig. (2-tailed)	.867	.872	.343		.175	.801	.426	.711	.261	.431	.231	.478
Pearson Correlation	.378	.732	.939*	.714	1	.760	.914*	.688	.924*	.911*	.981**	.761
Sig. (2-tailed)	.530	.159	.018	.175		.136	.030	.199	.025	.032	.003	.135
Pearson Correlation	.647	.815	.914*	.157	.760	1	.946*	.916*	.845	.943*	.829	.868
Sig. (2-tailed)	.238	.093	.030	.801	.136		.015	.029	.071	.016	.083	.056
Pearson Correlation	.613	.762	.996**	.469	.914*	.946*	1	.895*	.961**	.996**	.956*	.915*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.271	.134	.000	.426	.030	.015		.040	.009	.000	.011	.029
Pearson Correlation	.891*	.685	.870	.229	.688	.916*	.895*	1	.890*	.917*	.735	.814
Sig. (2-tailed)	.042	.202	.055	.711	.199	.029	.040		.043	.028	.157	.094
Pearson Correlation	.691	.679	.973**	.624	.924*	.845	.961**	.890*	1	.972**	.932*	.852
Sig. (2-tailed)	.196	.208	.005	.261	.025	.071	.009	.043		.006	.021	.067
Pearson Correlation	.661	.783	.991**	.464	.911*	.943*	.996**	.917*	.972**	1	.941*	.887*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.224	.117	.001	.431	.032	.016	.000	.028	.006		.017	.045
Pearson Correlation	.402	.700	.973**	.654	.981**	.829	.956*	.735	.932*	.941*	1	.867
Sig. (2-tailed)	.502	.188	.005	.231	.003	.083	.011	.157	.021	.017		.057
Pearson Correlation	.547	.478	.914*	.423	.761	.868	.915*	.814	.852	.887*	.867	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.340	.415	.030	.478	.135	.056	.029	.094	.067	.045	.057	

\*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Tables (3) and (4) introduce the score of the teachers' questionnaire about their own points of view on the difficulties that the PYP encountered in prepositions of place usages. 76.6% of the teachers attribute the difficulties to the

interference of the mother tongue, about 10% of the teachers see that the difficulties are due to other factors, while 13.4% of the teachers are not sure whether the difficulties are due to the interference of the mother tongue or other factors.

About 80% of the teachers claim that the students are careless in revising and dealing with prepositions of place, whereas 10% of the teachers see the opposite, and also about 10% of the teachers are not sure. The majority of the teachers (59.3%) see that the teachers should become aware of teaching prepositions through appropriate teachers' training, but 26.7% of the teachers express their disagreement, and 13.3% of teachers are not sure.

## **RESULTS**

From the obtained results, it is clear that the PYP students at Al Baha university encountered difficulties in prepositions of place. The findings revealed the factors stand behind these difficulties. One of the main factors is the interference of the mother tongue in the usage of prepositions of place. Another reason is that, the students tend to translate the preposition in their L1 which leads definitely to the misuse of prepositions. According to the teachers, the students show carelessness in dealing with prepositions and they were not equipped with appropriate knowledge and background about prepositions usage. The teachers also see that teaching preposition is not an easy task, so they suggest that teaching preposition should be through appropriate teachers' training.

The findings of this study match the hypotheses of the research. The research questions in this study are answered clearly and supported by the data analysis. The outcome of this study can be beneficial for syllabus designers who can include sufficient practices in the scope of prepositions in order to encourage the students develop their competence and

performance in preposition usage while writing in the target language.

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