Students’ Error in the Use of English Preposition
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Abstract
This study examined the abuse of English prepositions by learners. In the process of learning English as a second language it is inevitable for students to make errors when they produce the target language. It focused on the types of preposition errors, are distinguished between an error and a mistake. It also investigated the relationship between students’ level of study and prepositional errors. For this purpose, one hundred students were chosen through systematic random sampling under qualitative research paradigm. The survey method of sampling was used to carry out the study. The data was collected and analyzed through tables. Consequently the study bear out that our students are still prone to errors.

Keywords: Preposition, errors, mistake, error analysis.

INTRODUCTION
The English Language stands as one of the most used language in the world. It has spread its tentacles throughout the continents of the world and, as such it is a language that has acquired international status. As one of the heritages left behind by the colonial administration, it has come to stay in Nigeria. It not only serves as the lingua franca and the official language in Nigeria. Its role serves as a great help in uniting the different multi-ethnic and multi-lingual parts of Nigeria. As a tool of communication among Nigerians, it has helped in terms of business and other ventures with the international community. Communication will be restricted and meaningless if both participants involved do not share the knowledge of the language. It is to this end that the bastardization and adulteration of the English Language by Nigeria is of utmost disturbance. There are many kinds of English grammatical item the students learn. One of them is the preposition.

A preposition is a word governing, and usually preceding a noun or pronoun or other substantives to form phrases functioning as modifiers of verbs, nouns, or adjectives and that typically expresses a spatial, temporal, or other relationship, as in temporal, or other relationship, as in on, by to, since. It is one of the eight parts of speech. Ikiriko and Eko (1998) see it in a more technical sense, as “a word used to point out the relationship between things in time and space.”.

One of the major hurdles the non-native speakers of English, especially ESL learners, have to cross in the acquisition of the English syntax is the appropriate use of English prepositions. Akere (1990), in connection with the appropriate use of English prepositions, says “the correct use of prepositions is usually a problem to most non-native users of English” in fact wherever a language is learned or acquire one is faced with errors inevitably. Error is not a mistake but an imperfect competence in the target language. Put simply, errors are the flawed side of a learners speech or writing. Thus, impetus to this study was given by the fact that second language learners commit errors in their use of preposition. This study will, therefore, answer the following questions:
• What are the prepositional errors made by users of English as a second language (ESL)
• Is there any relationship between students level of study and prepositional errors,

**English Preposition**

Preposition are generally regarded as members of a class of words found in many languages of the world. They are usually used before nouns, pronouns or other substantives to form phrases functioning as modifiers of verbs, noun or adjectives in addition, preposition typically express a spatial temporal and others relationships (Mohammed, Lian, Elisa 2004, Ojetunde, 2005) Prepositions generally belong to closed system items, and as such, they are finite in number. This implies that we cannot create new members of prepositions. What a preposition basically does is to shown a relation between two objects. Concerning prepositions, Quick and Greenbaum (1973) said in the most general terms “a preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement”. The relation expressed by prepositions may be that of time, space, movement or position.

According to Quick and Greenbaum, there are two types of prepositions in English, and these are simple and complex prepositions. A simple preposition is a one-word preposition (e.g. to, on, under, at, before, over, below, above, out in, inside, etc) while a complex preposition consists of at least two words (eg. along with away from, up to, aside from, in front of; in comparison with, as a result of etc). Some scholars now believe that Quick and Greenbaum classification is not adequate enough for pedagogical reasons as it (i.e. the classification) jumps up together both the complex prepositions like up to which contains two prepositions and those which are made up of prepositions plus noun phrase plus prepositions as in: in the light of; as a result of etc.

In English, there are some words which collocate with specific prepositions. For instance, in English while of collocates with accused, with goes with charged, although the two expressions accused of and charged with basically express the same meaning. Thus, we observe that prepositions are a hazardous area in the learning of any second language.

**Concept of Error:**

In order to analyze learners error in a proper perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between ‘mistake’ and ‘error’. To distinguish between these two concepts, Ellis (1997) suggest two ways: the first one is to check the consistency of the learner’s performance. If he sometimes uses the correct form and sometimes the wrong one, it is a mistake. However, if he always uses it incorrectly, it is an error. According to Brown (2000), a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly while ‘an error is a noticeable deviation from adult grammar of a native speaker reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. Mistakes are unsystematic, occasional and occur typically at random. They hold no pedagogical relevance in error analysis.

**Sources of Errors:**

Brown (2000) classifies sources of errors into
• Interlingual transfer
• Interlingual transfer
• The context of learning

Interlingual transfer is the negative influence of the mother tongue of the learner while intralingual transfer, that is negative transfer of items within the target language. The context of learning which overlaps both types of transfer, for e.g, the classroom with the teacher and the materials in the case of school learning or the social situation in the case of untutored second language leaner. In a classroom context the teacher or the textbook can lead the learner to make wrong generalization about the language.

**Interlanguage Transfer:**

These are errors attributed to the native language. These kinds of error occur when the learner’s habits (patterns, systems, or rules) interfere or prevent him or her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language(Corder, 1971).
Interference (negative transfer) is negative influence of the mother tongue (Li) on the performance of the target language (L2). The dictionary of language teaching and linguistics (1992) defines interlingua errors as being the result of language transfer, which is caused by learners first language. These are errors which learners make in L2.

**Intralingual Error:**

These are errors due to the language being learnt (target language), independent of the native language. For instance, many learners go through a stage in their English acquisition process where they use ‘present’ tense instead of ‘past tense’ or he can sings. According to Richard (1971), “They are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalization based on partial exposure to the target language (Richard, 1974, p.6). In general terms, they refer to the deviations from the norms of the target language which ‘derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition and the mutual interference of items within the target language (Richard, 1974, p. 182).

Intra lingual transfer (within the target language) itself is a major factor. At an intermediate level, learners previous experience and existing subsumes begin to influence structures within the target language itself. Most of the time, negative intralingua transfer occur and these kinds of error are called developmental errors. Ellis (1997) states that some errors seems to be universal, reflecting learner’s attempt to make the task of learning and using the target language simpler. The use of the past tense suffix ‘ed’ for all verbs is an example of amplification and overgeneralization.

**Prepositional Errors:**

There are three types of prepositional error they are: superfluous prepositional errors, incomplete prepositional errors, and confused or substituted prepositional errors.

**Superfluous Preposition:**

The use of redundant prepositions, that is placing side by side two similar prepositions in an utterance. For instance, discuss about reverse back, return back, borrow out, peruse through, roam about, demand for, turn around, eject out etc.

**Incomplete Preposition:**

These are errors made by omission. By omission we mean the absence of an item that must appear in a well formed utterance. Some parts of the prepositional phrase especially complex or phrasal prepositions are left out. Examples are: on air, for on the air, and on phone, for on the phone.

It depends of her (**on**)

The man gave her (**it to her**)

I went to movie (**the**)

Unnecessary and insertion of preposition

Some people insert preposition into sentences unnecessarily. Examples are:

a. Kamsi requested **for** an extra day’s holiday, but the Dean refused (for)

b. He was raised **up** by his grandmother

c. You can discuss **about** this matter with your pastor (about)
Other prepositional errors are: *shout on*, instead of, *shout at*; if *regaled* in instead of ‘*regaled,*’ *died of* instead of *died from,* *with regards* to instead of *with regard to* and a host of others.

**Methodology**

This study examines errors in a corpus drawn from about 1000 students of Mass communication department at federal Polytechnic, Oko. It is not possible to use all of them, so this paper will use only 100 students. The sample will represent twenty-five students each from each level and the survey method of sampling shall be used to carry out the study.

**Procedure**

The test questions are taken to the class and given to the students that have been selected to answer the questions. This is done to ensure equity. The students will be given two days to answer the questions faithfully. After which they will be collected and analysis will begin.

**Data Analysis Technique**

The method that will be used for the data analysis is the percentage technique. This comprises identifying the total number of a particular error and dividing it with the total number of questions and multiplying by 100. For instance, if a candidate has ten errors, this ten will be divided by fifty multiplied by 100 e.g.

\[
\frac{10 \times 100}{5} = 1
\]

Representing the formulaic symbols.

**Testing Instruments**

The research design is a test comprising objective questions. Students have optional prepositions to fill in the gaps of the sentences. A total of fifty questions will be asked to test all types of prepositions. The test also comprises the questionnaire part where the students will need to fill in his/ her personal data. This is done so as to see if there are any external or biographical information that must have influenced the kinds of prepositional errors made.

**Result**

**Question 2**

Is there any relationship between students level of study and prepositional errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Students</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this table, there exists a relationship between education and prepositional errors. 45 respondents scoring 60% accepted the relationship, 30 scoring 40% rejected any relationship.

**Question 1**

This paper shows from the returned questionnaire that there are constant prepositional errors made by respondents. Generally there are constant and frequently committed prepositional errors. Examples of such frequently committed errors as shown by the marked are:

Discuss about, comprises of, advocated for, with regards to, congratulated for, on air, on phone, go in for business, break of, breast of, ask for, glad for, repented from, good in, competence on, entered inside, etc.
These preposition errors can be classified into four groups: superfluous, incomplete, confused and illogical prepositional errors.

**Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

In this paper, we have examined student errors in their use of preposition. It can be concluded that many students at Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Nigeria make a lot of errors in their use of prepositions. Their use of English prepositions indicates that their knowledge of this syntactic class is low. This is because our analysis reveals that our subjects (100 students) are still prone to errors involving omission of prepositions, wrong insertion of prepositions, redundant use of prepositions and wrong choice of prepositions. It is also intended to draw lecturers (English lecturers) attention on the situation of our students because it is necessary to determine the areas that require remedy in order to think of appropriate solutions.

**REFERENCES**


**QUESTIONNAIRE ON PREPOSITION**

**PART A**

1. Name: ____________________________________________
2. Department of Study: ____________________________________________
3. Level of Study: ____________________________________________
4. Age: ____________________________________________
5. Sex: ____________________________________________
7. Do you use English often? Yes/No

**PART B**
1. Sorry, I am not willing to discuss the matter. (discuss, about)
2. He congratulated me on my success. (for, on, in, about)
3. I prefer this table than that one. (to, than, more than, better than)
4. He entered his car and drove off. (inside, entered, entered into, entered in, entered)
5. Mary could not stop rather she walked the house. (passed, past, passed over, pass over)
6. The car comprises many compartments. (comprises, comprises of, comprises with)
7. The president solicited the co-operation of his ministers. (solicited, solicited on, solicited for, solicited about)
8. The prefect shares the oranges with the three girls. (between, among, within, on)
9. The principal advocated for an open ballot election. (advocated for, advocated bout, advocated on, advocated)
10. The man reached Aba before ten O’clock. (reached on, reached for, reached at, reached)
11. My shirt is inferior to yours, but John’s is superior than yours. (than/to, than/to, them)
12. He lived here three weeks. (on, at, since, for)
13. I am not very good at setting disputes. (on, in, for, at)
14. His competence is questionable. (at, in, for, on)
15. I have never traveled to Aba since three years. (since/passed, for/past, since/past, in/passed)
16. He was charged with murder. (for, in, with, on)
17. I am going to the bank to exchange some naira notes. some dollars. (with, for, by, on)
18. I cannot confide him, but can rely Jesus (in/on, on/on, at/on, on/in)
19. He stressed the need for everybody to work hard. (stressed or emphasized, stressed on or emphasized on, stressed about or emphasized about, stressed at or emphasized)
20. your suggestion, I would have no objection. (with reference, with regards to, as regard to, with regard to)
21. Mar is annoyed by John, and she is angered Susan. (by, by/with, on/with, at/on)
22. I am glad your coming. (at, for, with, after)
23. He asked you when he come. (for, after, with, on)
24. He could be easily passed James. (at, for, from, with)
25. I shall part you in a minutes. (at, for, with, after)
26. I came 4.30pm. (during, by, at)
27. I came 4.30pm. (before, from, in)
28. I came…………. 4.30pm, (during, around)
29. I came…………. 4.30pm. (since, near)
30. David lives…………. the swimming pool.(in, at, near)
31. My sister is…………. Great Britain. (cross, in, off)
32. Meet me…………. the cinema. (at, around, about)
33. I walked…………. the street. (around, across, about)
34. The town hall is…………. the hospital and St. Johns’ College.(near, opposite, between)

In the sentences below use the following prepositions (away, from, into, towards, out, and to)
35. Akosu went…………. the building.
36. Did he go…………. the library?
37. He ran…………. the classroom.
38. He role…………. the Church.
39. He rode…………. the town
40. The showbiz programme is…………. (on air, in the, on the air, in air)
41. I spoke with him…………. yesterday. (by phone, on phone)
42. After so many convictions, I think it is time he repented…………. (his sins. (form, of, to, with)
43. Jane was ordered by her boss to keep abreast…………. the events of the community.(of, with, to, for)
44. Please put…………. the light. (off, down, out)
45. The rumours have now died…………. (down, away, off)
46. Tell, Chidi to turn…………. the volume of the radio. (off, down, out)
47. The director promised to…………. the matter, (on, at, into, up)
48. The two stars will break…………. their engagement. (down, off, up, away)
49. I advised her to look…………. thieves. (out, in, for, away)
50. After graduation, I will go…………. business. (for, in, for, into, on)